

STAR
WARSTM

STAR WARS™

Jedi Quest Omnibus

Volume Two

Jude Watson



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Star Wars: The Shadow Trap

Star Wars: The Moment of Truth

Star Wars: The Changing of the Guard

Star Wars: The False Peace

Star Wars: The Final Showdown

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Includes

Books

Six Through Ten

STAR WARS Timeline



DAWN OF THE JEDI 25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Dawn of the Jedi
Dawn of the Jedi
Volume One: Force Storm
Volume Two: Prisoner of Bogan
Volume Three: Force War



THE OLD REPUBLIC 5,000-1,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

5,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Tales of the Jedi
The Golden Age of the Sith
The Fall of the Sith Empire
Crosscurrent

4,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Tales of the Jedi
Knights of the Old Republic
The Freedon Nadd Uprising
Dark Lords of the Sith
The Sith War
Redemption

3,964 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Knights of the Old Republic
Volume One: Commencement
Volume Two: Flashpoint
Volume Three: Days of Fear, Nights of Anger
Volume Four: Daze of Hate, Knights of Suffering
Volume Five: Vector
Volume Six: Vindication
Volume Seven: Dueling Ambitions
Volume Eight: Destroyer
Volume Nine: Demon
War

3,956 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC
The Old Republic
Revan

3,951 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS

3,678 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Old Republic
Volume Two: Blood of the Empire

3,653 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Old Republic
Deceived
Volume One: The Threat of Peace

3,645 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Old Republic
Red Harvest
The Old Republic
Fatal Alliance
Volume Three: The Lost Suns
Annihilation

THE OLD REPUBLIC

3,638 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
THE OLD REPUBLIC: SHADOW OF REVAN

THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS OF THE FALLEN EMPIRE

3,630 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS OF THE ETERNAL THRONE

2,974 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Lost Tribe of the Sith
Spiral

1,032 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Knight Errant
Volume One: Aflame
Knight Errant
Volume Two: Deluge
Volume Three: Escape

1,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Darth Bane
Path of Destruction
Jedi vs. Sith
Darth Bane
Rule of Two
Dynasty of Evil



RISE OF THE SITH 1,000-22 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

67 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Darth Plagueis

53 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Jedi - The Dark Side

44 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Jedi Apprentice
The Rising Force
The Dark Rival
The Hidden Past
The Mark of the Crown
The Defenders of the Dead
The Uncertain Path
The Captive Temple
The Day of Reckoning
The Fight for Truth
The Shattered Peace
Special Edition: Deceptions

43 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Jedi Apprentice
The Deadly Hunter
The Evil Experiment
The Dangerous Rescue

41 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Jedi Apprentice
The Ties that Bind
The Death of Hope
The Call to Vengeance
The Only Witness
The Threat Within

38 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan
The Aurorient Express
The Last Stand on Ord Mantell

33 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Jedi Council - Acts of War
Maul: Lockdown

32 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Republic
Volume One: Prelude to Rebellion
Darth Maul
Episode I Adventures
Search for the Lost Jedi
The Bartokk Assassins
The Fury of Darth Maul
Jedi Emergency
The Ghostling Children
The Hunt for Anakin Skywalker
Capture Arawynne
Trouble on Tatooine
Rescue in the Core
Festival of Warriors
Pirates from Beyond the Sea
The Bongo Rally
Cloak of Deception
Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE

BOUNTY HUNTER

Jango Fett - Open Seasons
Republic
Volume Two: Outlander
Volume Three: Emissaries to Malastare
Volume Four: Twilight
Infinity's End

30 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Republic
Volume Five: The Hunt for Aurra Sing
Volume Six: Darkness
Volume Seven: The Stark Hyperspace War
Volume Eight: Rite of Passage

29 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Rogue Planet

28 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Jedi Quest
Path to Truth
Jedi Quest

27 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Outbound Flight
Jedi Quest
The Way of the Apprentice
The Trail of the Jedi
The Dangerous Games

25 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Jedi Quest
The Master of Disguise
The School of Fear
The Shadow Trap
The Moment of Truth

24 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Jedi Quest
The Changing of the Guard
The False Peace
Starfighter: Crossbones
Republic
Volume Nine: Honor and Duty

23 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Jedi Quest
The Final Showdown
Star Wars Adventures
Hunt the Sun Runner
The Cavern of Screaming Skulls
The Hostage Princess
Jango Fett vs. the Razor Eaters
The Shape-Shifter Strikes
The Warlords of Balmorra

22 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*

JEDI STARFIGHTER

The Approaching Storm
Blood Ties: A Tale of Jango & Boba Fett

EPISODE II: ATTACK OF THE CLONES

REPUBLIC COMMANDO

THE CLONE WARS (VIDEO GAME)

Boba Fett
The Fight to Survive
Crossfire

Clone Wars
Volume One: The Defense of Kamino

Boba Fett
Maze of Deception
Hunted

Clone Wars
Volume Two: Victories and Sacrifices

Republic Commando
Hard Contact

CLONE WARS: VOLUME ONE

SkyeWalkers

Clone Wars
Volume Four: Light and Dark
The Cestus Deception
Jedi Trial

Clone Wars
Volume Three: Last Stand on Jabim
Volume Five: The Best Blades
Volume Six: On the Fields of Battle

THE CLONE WARS: THE MOVIE

THE CLONE WARS: SEASON ONE

The Clone Wars: Secret Missions
Breakout Squad
Curse of the Black Hole Pirates
Duel at Shattered Rock
Guardians of the Chiss Key

The Clone Wars
Volume One: Shipyards of Doom
Wild Space
No Prisoners
Volume Two: Crash Course

THE CLONE WARS: REPUBLIC HEROES

The Clone Wars
The Colossus of Destiny
Hero of the Confederacy

Shatterpoint
Republic Commando
Triple Zero

21 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*

THE CLONE WARS: SEASON TWO

The Clone Wars Gambit
Stealth
Siege

The Clone Wars
The Wind Raiders of Talorann
Republic Commando
True Colors

Medstar
Battle Surgeons
Jedi Healer

THE CLONE WARS: SEASON THREE

The Clone Wars
Deadly Hands of Shon-Ju
Strange Allies
The Starcrusher Trap

THE CLONE WARS: SEASON FOUR

The Clone Wars
The Smuggler's Code
The Sith Hunters
Defenders of the Lost Temple

THE CLONE WARS: SEASON FIVE

20 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*

General Grievous

THE CLONE WARS: SEASON SIX

Clone Wars
Volume Eight: The Last Siege, the Final Truth
Volume Seven: When They Were Brothers

Boba Fett
A New Threat
Pursuit

19 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Yoda: Dark Rendezvous

CLONE WARS: VOLUME TWO

Labyrinth of Evil

EPISODE III: REVENGE OF THE SITH

Republic Commando
Order 66

Republic
Volume Nine: Endgame

Kenobi

Purge

Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader

Dark Times

Volume One: The Path to Nowhere

Darth Vader

Darth Vader & The Lost Command

Imperial Commando: 501st

Dark Times

Volume Two: Parallels

Volume Three: Vector

Coruscant Nights

Jedi Twilight

Darth Vader

Darth Vader & The Ghost Prison

Dark Times

Volume Four: Blue Harvest

Volume Five: Out of the Wilderness

Volume Six: Fire Carrier

Volume Seven: A Spark Remains

18 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Vader

Darth Vader & The Ninth Assassin

Last of the Jedi

The Desperate Mission

Dark Warning

Underworld

Death on Naboo

A Tangled Web

Return of the Dark Side

Secret Weapon

Against the Empire

Master of Deception

Reckoning

Coruscant Nights

Streets of Shadow

Patterns of Force

The Last Jedi

17 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Vader

Darth Vader & Cry of Shadows

15 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

DROIDS

10 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Droids (Marvel)

The Han Solo Trilogy

The Paradise Snare

5 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Droids (Dark Horse)

Volume One: The Kalarba Adventures

Volume Two: Rebellion

Volume Three: Season of Revolt

Jabba the Hutt

The Gaar Suppoon Hit

The Hunger of Princess Nampi

The Dynasty Trap

Betrayal

The Han Solo Trilogy

The Hutt Gambit

4 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Lando Calrissian Adventures

Lando Calrissian & the Mindharp of Sharu

3 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Lando Calrissian Adventures

Lando Calrissian & the Flamewind of Oseon

Boba Fett

Enemy of the Empire

The Lando Calrissian Adventures

Lando Calrissian & the Starcave of Thonboka

THE FORCE UNLEASHED

Death Star

Agent of the Empire

Volume One: Iron Eclipse

2 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Agent of the Empire

Volume Two: Hard Targets

The Han Solo Trilogy

Rebel Dawn

The Han Solo Adventures

Han Solo At Star's End

Han Solo's Revenge

Han Solo and the Lost Legacy

Adventures in Hyperspace

Fire Ring Race

Shinbone Showdown

1 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

THE FORCE UNLEASHED II

Star Wars Adventures

Han Solo & The Hollow Moon of Khorya

Dark Forces

Soldier for the Empire

Empire

Volume One: Betrayal

Death Troopers

Underworld - The Yavin Vassilika

Empire

Volume Two: Darklighter

EMPIRE AT WAR

X-WING

Blood Ties: Boba Fett is Dead

LETHAL ALLIANCE

DARK FORCES

Shadow Games

The Assassination of Darth Vader



THE REBELLION

0-4 YEARS AFTER

STAR WARS: A New Hope

**0 EPISODE IV:
A NEW HOPE**

**BATTLEFRONT: RENEGADE
SQUADRON**

REBEL ASSAULT

**ROGUE SQUADRON II:
ROGUE LEADER**

Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina

Empire

Volume Three: The Imperial Perspective

**ROGUE SQUADRON III:
REBEL STRIKE**

Star Wars Missions

Assault on Yavin 4

Escape from Thyferra

Attack on Delrakkin

Destroy the Liquidator

Scoundrels

Pizzazz

The Keeper's World

The Kingdom of Ice

Star Wars Missions

Darth Vader's Return

Rogue Squadron to the Rescue

Bounty on Bonodan

Total Destruction

Rebel Force
Target
Hostage
Renegade
Firefight
Trapped

Allegiance

Rebel Force
Uprising

Empire
Volume Three: The Imperial Perspective

Classic Star Wars
Volume One: Doomworld
Volume Two: Dark Encounters

Science Adventures
Emergency in Escape Pod Four
Journey Across Planet X

Star Wars Missions
Revolt of the Battle Droids
Showdown in Mos Eisley
Bounty Hunters vs. Battle Droids
The Vactooine Disaster

Star Wars
Volume One: In the Shadow of Yavin
Volume Two: From the Ruins of Alderaan
Volume Three: Rebel Girl
Volume Four: A Shattered Hope

ROGUE SQUADRON

Galaxy of Fear
Eaten Alive
City of the Dead
Planet Plague

Empire
Volume Four: The Heart of the Rebellion
Volume Five: Allies and Adversaries
River of Chaos

Boba Fett
Man with a Mission

Galaxy of Fear
Ghost of the Jedi
Army of Terror

Empire
Volume Six: In the Shadows of their Fathers
Volume Seven: The Wrong Side of the War

Galaxy of Fear
The Brain Spiders
The Swarm

Choices of One

Rebellion
Volume One: My Brother, My Enemy
Volume Two: The Ahakista Gambit
Volume Three: Small Victories
Volume Four: Vector

Boba Fett
Overkill

Galaxy of Fear
Spore
The Doomsday Ship
Clones

Star Wars Adventures
Chewbacca & the Slavers of the Shadowlands

1 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Galaxy of Fear
The Hunger

THE STAR WARS HOLIDAY SPECIAL

Star Wars Missions
The Hunt for Han Solo
The Search for Grubba the Hutt
Ithorian Invasion
Togorian Trap

Empire and Rebellion
Honor Among Thieves

Galaxies: The Ruins of Dantooine

Star Wars Missions
Prisoner of the Nikto Pirates
The Monster of Dweem
Voyage to the Underworld
Imperial Jailbreak

2 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: GALAXIES

TIE FIGHTER

Splinter of the Mind's Eye

Star Wars Adventures
Princess Leia and the Royal Ransom
Boba Fett and the Ship of Fear

Epic Collection
The Newspaper Strips Volume One
The Newspaper Strips Volume Two
Empire and Rebellion
Razor's Edge

3 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Rebel Heist

EPISODE V: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

X-WING ASSAULT

Tales of the Bounty Hunters

Star Wars Adventures
Luke Skywalker & the Treasure of the Dragonsnakes
The Will of Darth Vader

Classic Star Wars
Volume Three: Resurrection of Evil
Volume Three: Screams of the Void

X-WING VS. TIE FIGHTER

EWOKS SEASON ONE

EWOKS SEASON TWO

EWOKS: CARAVAN OF COURAGE

EWOKS: BATTLE FOR ENDOR

Classic Star Wars
Volume Five: A Fool's Bounty (#68-72)

SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE

The Bounty Hunters: Scoundrel's Wages

Battle of the Bounty Hunters

Classic Star Wars
Volume Five: A Fool's Bounty (#73-81)

REBEL ASSAULT II: THE HIDDEN EMPIRE



THE NEW REPUBLIC 4-24 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

4 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales from Jabba's Palace

EPISODE VI: RETURN OF THE JEDI

Mara Jade: By the Emperor's Hand

The Bounty Hunter
The Mandalorian Armor
Slave Ship
Hard Merchandise

The Truce at Bakura

Classic Star Wars
Volume Six: Wookiee World
Volume Seven: Far, Far Away

Shadows of the Empire: Evolution

X-Wing: Rogue Leader

X-Wing: Rogue Squadron
Volume One: The Rebel Opposition
Volume Two: The Phantom Affair
Volume Three: Battleground: Tatooine
Volume Four: The Warrior Princess
Volume Five: Requiem for a Rogue
Volume Six: In the Empire's Service
Volume Seven: Blood and Honor
Volume Eight: Masquerade
Volume Nine: Mandatory Retirement

Jedi Prince
The Glove of Darth Vader
The Lost City of the Jedi
Zorba the Hutt's Revenge
Mission from Mount Yoda
Queen of the Empire
Prophets of the Dark Side

5 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Tales from the New Republic
Boba Fett
Twin Engines of Destruction
Luke Skywalker & the Shadows of Mindor
The Heart of the Jedi

JEDI KNIGHT: DARK FORCES II

Dark Forces
Rebel Agent
Jedi Knight

6 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

X-Wing
Rogue Squadron

7 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

X-Wing
Wedge's Gamble
The Kryptos Trap
The Bacta War
Wrath Squadron
Iron Fist
Solo Command

8 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

The Courtship of Princess Leia
Tatooine Ghost

9 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Thrawn Trilogy
Heir to the Empire
Dark Force Rising
The Last Command
X-Wing
Isard's Revenge

10 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

JEDI KNIGHT: MYSTERIES OF THE SITH

Dark Empire Trilogy
Dark Empire
Dark Empire II

Boba Fett
Bounty on Bar-Kooda
When the Fat Lady Swings
Murder Most Foul

11 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Dark Empire Trilogy
Empire's End

Boba Fett
Agent of Doom

Crimson Empire
Crimson Empire

The Bounty Hunters: Kenix Kil

Crimson Empire
Council of Blood

Jedi Academy
Jedi Search
Dark Apprentice
Champions of the Force

I, Jedi

12 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Children of the Jedi

JEDI KNIGHT II: JEDI OUTCAST

Darksaber

13 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

X-Wing
Starfighters of Adumar
Planet of Twilight

Jedi Academy
Leviathan
Crimson Empire
Empire Lost

14 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

The Crystal Star

JEDI KNIGHT: JEDI ACADEMY

16 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Black Fleet Crisis
Before the Storm
Shield of Lies
Tyrant's Nest

17 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

The New Rebellion

18 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Corellian Trilogy
Ambush at Corellia
Assault at Selonia
Showdown at Centerpoint

19 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Hand of Thrawn
Specter of the Past
Vision of the Future
Union
Scourge

22 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Junior Jedi Knights
The Golden Globe
Lyric's World
Promises
Anakin's Quest
Vader's Fortress
Kenobi's Blade
Survivor's Quest

23 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Young Jedi Knights
Hairs of the Force
Shadow Academy
The Lost Ones
Lightsabers
Darkest Knight
Jedi Under Siege
Shards of Alderaan

24 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Young Jedi Knights
Diversity Alliance
Delusions of Grandeur
Jedi Bounty
The Emperor's Plague
Return to Ord Mantell
Trouble on Cloud City
Crisis on Crystal Reef



NEW JEDI ORDER

25-36 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

25 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

New Jedi Order
Vector Prime

Invasion

Volume One: Refugees
Volume Two: Rescues
Volume Three: Revelations

New Jedi Order

Dark Tide: Onslaught
Dark Tide: Ruin
Agents of Chaos: Hero's Trial
Agents of Chaos: Jedi Eclipse

Chewbacca

26 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

New Jedi Order
Balance Point
Edge of Victory: Conquest
Edge of Victory: Rebirth

27 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
Star by Star
Dark Journey
Enemy Lines: Rebel Dream
Enemy Lines: Rebel Stand
Traitor

28 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
Destiny's Way
Force Heretic: Remnant
Force Heretic: Refugee
Force Heretic: Reunion
The Final Prophecy

29 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
The Unifying Force

35 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dark Nest
The Joiner King

36 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dark Nest
The Unseen Queen
The Swarm War



LEGACY

**40-139 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy of the Force
Betrayal
Bloodlines
Tempest
Exile
Sacrifice
Inferno
Fury

41 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy of the Force
Revelation
Invincible
Crosscurrent
Riptide

43 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Millennium Falcon
Fate of the Jedi
Outcast
Omen
Abyss
Backlash

44 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Fate of the Jedi
Allies
Vortex
Conviction
Ascension
Apocalypse
X-Wing
Mercy Kill

45 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Crucible

137 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy
Volume One: Broken
Volume Two: Shards
Volume Three: Claws of the Dragon
Volume Four: Alliance
Volume Five: The Hidden Temple
Volume Six: Legacy
Volume Seven: Storms
Volume Eight: Tatooine
Volume Nine: Monster
Volume Ten: Extremes

138 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy
War

Legacy II
Volume One: Prisoner of the Floating World
Volume Two: Outcasts of the Broken Ring

139 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy II
Volume Three: Wanted: Ania Solo
Volume Four: Empire of One

Contents

The Shadow Trap	01
The Moment of Truth	93
The Changing of the Guard	191
The False Peace	301
The Final Showdown	415

Book Six
The Shadow Trap

STAR
WARS®

JEDI QUEST

BY JUDE WATSON

THE SHADOW TRAP



Chapter One

Anakin Skywalker hated being between missions. As far as he was concerned, having free time was highly overrated. How many times could he perfect his Jung Ma movement in dulon training?

Countless times, his Master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, would say.

Anakin pulled his outer tunic over his head and tossed it on the grassy bank of the lake. He took three quick steps and dived into the clear, green water. Without a mission, he just felt aimless. There was much to do at the Temple, of course. Being a Jedi meant that training never stopped. Perfecting his battle mind, bettering his grasp of galactic politics—these were all necessary tasks between missions. Usually, Anakin tried to use his time at the Temple well. But this time...this time, all he wanted to do was swim.

He chose a time when the lake was deserted. For some reason, this was at midday, when most Jedi students were deep in study or training, and Jedi Knights were busy as well, perfecting the ideal battle skills that Anakin should have been perfecting.

All Anakin knew was that he could not wait to dive into the cool, green water. He felt his mind calm as he swam underwater, playing with the rays of light that penetrated beneath the surface. He and his Master were not communicating well. Ever since his

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mission to Andara, there had been distance between them. Obi-Wan had said he was deeply disappointed in him. Although it was not in the character of a Jedi to dwell on the past, Anakin remembered that comment like a knife in his heart. It haunted every moment of their time together.

In the past he had sometimes felt irritated at Obi-Wan's corrections, his need to always show Anakin how he could have done something better, or more patiently, or more thoroughly. Now he missed them. He saw them now for what they were—a dedication to him, a need to help him be the best Jedi he could be.

Anakin broke the surface and shook off drops of water. He was close to the waterfall now, and he paused to feel the cool mist on his skin. With a few quick strokes he swam to the bank and hauled himself up to sit underneath the spray.

And, just like that, it happened.

The vision came, and the peaceful scene before him fell away. The rushing water became a rush of air so intense that it hurt his ears. Images came and went so quickly they were like pulses of light: a massive fleet at his command; a revolt of hundreds of slaves as they shouted his name; striding through the dusty streets of Mos Espa and reaching the door of his old home. The images stopped and froze only once. His mother's face as he clasped her against him. He touched the slave cuffs at her wrists and they fell to the floor. He heard the clang.

And then there was an explosion of light and sorrow, and he knew he had lost Shmi, had lost, in fact, everyone he loved, including Obi-Wan.

The One Below remains below.

Suddenly Anakin felt the grass underneath his fingers, springy and soft. He heard the sound of the waterfall. The explosion of blinding light fractured and mellowed into the cool greens of the water.

It was the third time he had had the vision. Before, it had come late at night, when he was close to sleep. The first time it

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

had been almost a dream. The second, it had been clear and sharp. But this time it was insistent. It seemed to cling to him like a sticky web he couldn't escape.

What did it mean? Why did the vision of liberating slaves come to him? He hadn't had that thought since he was a young boy on Tatooine. He often dwelled on his mother, of course, dreamed of freeing her from her harsh life. Yet this vision was so *real*. It felt as though he really had the power to do it. He saw now the difference between a dream and a vision.

Who was The One Below?

Anakin shook his head, watching as water droplets hit the skin of his forearm. He felt troubled and weary. Swimming every day wasn't enough to clear his mind, calm his heart.

It was time to tell Obi-Wan about it.

On Andara, Obi-Wan had faulted him for acting without regard to his instructions. Anakin had known that a fellow Jedi Padawan, Ferus Olin, had disappeared. Instead of telling Obi-Wan, he had gone off with the group he was investigating. Anakin had thought that he would find Ferus by continuing with the mission. Obi-Wan had disagreed when he found out. Anakin had never seen him so angry. He had felt that Anakin had violated an essential core of trust between them.

It had not mattered at all that Ferus had been found safe, and that the mission had been successful.

It made no difference to the Jedi Council, either. Anakin had been asked to appear before the full Council and accept a reprimand, a serious failing for a Padawan. He and Obi-Wan had been on several missions since, but things between them weren't the same. They had lost a rhythm Anakin had not been sure was there, until he had lost it.

Reluctantly, Anakin slipped back into his tunic with one hand and, with the other, contacted his Master on his comlink. Obi-Wan answered immediately.

"It's Anakin. I need to speak to you about something. I don't wish to interrupt you, but—"

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"I'm in the Room of the Thousand Fountains."

"I'll be there in a few minutes, then."

Anakin shoved his comlink back into his belt. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt free to tease his Master, or the last time Obi-Wan had made a joke. Lately he'd begun to wonder if Obi-Wan still wanted him as his Padawan at all. It was not unheard of for a Master to step away. Unusual, yes, but not every pairing was the right one. It was considered no shame on the Padawan if a more appropriate Master was needed. But Anakin would feel the shame.

The Room of the Thousand Fountains wasn't far from the lake. He hurried down the wooded trail. Illumination banks overhead created an impression of sunlight streaming through the green leaves. Anakin wished he could enjoy the peace that the Jedi found on these shores.

His Master was sitting on a favorite bench, his eyes closed. No doubt he was meditating or listening to the fountains that were often compared to the delicate chiming of bells.

Without opening his eyes, his Master spoke. "You sounded disturbed."

Anakin sat next to him. Obi-Wan opened his eyes and sent him a penetrating glance. "I've had a vision," Anakin said. "It's come three times, and I need to make sense of it."

"Visions do not always make sense." Obi-Wan swung around to face Anakin. "Tell me about it."

Anakin outlined the vision. It was still so clear in his head that he had no trouble remembering the details.

"The One Below remains below," Obi-Wan murmured.

"Do you know what that means?"

Obi-Wan didn't answer. "Yoda should hear about this."

"Hear about what, I wonder," Yoda called, heading toward them and leaning on his gimer stick. "To find you, I come, Obi-Wan. Expecting a problem, I was not."

Obi-Wan smiled as he rose. "Not a problem. A vision has been troubling Anakin."

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

“A vision, you say?” Yoda swiveled to fix Anakin with a curious look. He settled himself on a rock and rested his hands on top of his stick, his posture for listening.

Once again, Anakin related the vision, leaving out his feelings about it. He knew that Yoda would want to know only the details.

Strangely, Yoda repeated the same thing that Obi-Wan had. “The One Below remains below,” he murmured.

“Do you know who that is, Master Yoda?” Anakin asked.

Yoda nodded slowly. “Know her well, I do. Master Yaddle, it is.”

“Master Yaddle was imprisoned for centuries on the world of Koda,” Obi-Wan explained. “The Kodans gave her that name, The One Below.”

Anakin nodded. He had known about Yaddle’s long imprisonment, but he had never heard that name. Yaddle was the same species as Yoda, and sat on the Jedi Council. She was a revered Jedi Master. He was surprised that she’d been a part of his vision.

“About to leave on a mission to Mawan, she is,” Yoda said. “A troubling one, I fear. Debated, we have, which Jedi team to send with her. The answer, perhaps your vision is.”

Anakin felt a rush of disappointment. He realized at that moment that he had been hoping that the vision meant he needed to travel to Tatooine. He had imagined that he would be able to step out of his dreams and free his mother in reality. “I thought perhaps the vision meant I could somehow help the slaves on Tatooine,” he said hesitantly.

Yoda and Obi-Wan both shook their heads.

“Careful you must be. Difficult to interpret, visions are,” Yoda said. “A map, a vision is not.”

Anakin hid his impatience. Wasn’t Yoda interpreting his vision for him, and telling him where he needed to go?

Obi-Wan sensed his confusion. “Visions of freeing slaves are not surprising,” he told Anakin. “That desire rests deep within

Jude Watson

you. It is natural that it would rise up in some form. To follow a vision literally is often a mistake.”

“But isn’t following Yaddle also literal?” Anakin asked.

Yoda made a slight gesture with his gimer stick, an acknowledgment of Anakin’s point. “A warning, the vision is.” He turned to Obi-Wan. “Grave, the situation on Mawan has become.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “It is a sad situation. I knew the planet when it was thriving.”

“Open now, this world is,” Yoda said.

“Open?” Anakin asked.

“Mawan was torn apart by a civil war ten years ago,” Obi-Wan explained. “The planet was decimated by the conflict and was never able to set up a government afterward. The capital city completely lost its infrastructure—its roads deteriorated, its space lanes went unmonitored, and finally its power grid went down completely. Much of the housing was destroyed, too. A majority of the citizens were left jobless and homeless. Many moved to the country, but a famine devastated the population there. The absence of government, security, and hope left a void that criminal elements rushed in to fill. It’s now an open world, where anything can happen without fear of the law. Criminals from throughout the galaxy have set up operations there. There is no safety for the citizens.”

“Too busy, the Senate has been,” Yoda said. “But ignore Mawan, they can no longer. Ripples of evil, open worlds have. Affect the galaxy, they do. Asked the Senate has for a Jedi presence to help establish a provisional government committee. To have the trust of the Mawans, a diplomat we need.”

“A diplomat, yes, but also a warrior,” Obi-Wan remarked. “Someone who can convince the criminal gangs that it is in their best interest to leave the planet. I can see why you chose Yaddle.”

Yoda inclined his head. “Our most able diplomat, she is. Accomplished in the ways of the Force. But assistance she needs.

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

Help her, you and your Padawan must, for important this mission is. As goes Mawan, so go other worlds. Growing in the galaxy, the dark side is.”

“We are ready, Master Yoda,” Obi-Wan said.

Anakin nodded. But he felt a dread he did not understand. Even hearing the name of the planet had created a sour feeling in his stomach. Usually a mission excited him, no matter how difficult or dangerous. Yet he knew that he did not want to go to Mawan.

Chapter Two

The Republic cruiser flew low over Mawan's capital city of Naatan. Obi-Wan leaned closer to look out the cockpit window. The power grid was being fought over by the crimelords, and had been repeatedly damaged in successive raids and takeovers. Tonight the grid was down and the city was black. It rose out of the night like a dark shadow.

He had flown into Naatan at night before. Years ago, before the war. The city had glowed from kilometers above in space. The Mawans were fond of soft colors, which they used to filter the harsh light of their world. They used delicate rose lights to illuminate their streets and plazas at night, and from the air the city had glowed like a rare pink jewel.

He had always enjoyed his visits to Naatan. The city had been a thriving cosmopolitan center. It had been an important stop on the primary Core trade route, and the wealth of the city had spread to its parks, libraries, and schools.

As they flew lower, dipping down into an unused space lane, he could see that those parks were now black holes in the landscape, as painful as wounds. The schools were now in ruins, the libraries leveled. Obi-Wan saw broken windows, twisted gates, half-demolished cafés. Abandoned speeders left on the street. Everywhere he looked, Obi-Wan saw desolation. It wasn't

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

just the property, it was what the property represented—the ruin of so many lives, busy lives that had been lived in pleasant surroundings. Now those lives had been driven underground, and evil had moved into the vacuum.

“Gone underground,” Euraana Fall said. “The only ones who remain are part of the criminal gangs.” A native of Naatan, Euraana had the delicate, pale skin and blue veins that were prized by the Mawan. Mawans had two hearts and their blue veins lay close to their skin, a mark of beauty on the planet. Euraana’s grief showed in her shimmering gray eyes, but her voice was steady. “Most of the citizens live in the infrastructure tunnels. Before the Great Purge—what Mawans call the civil war—all of our goods were transported below the city, in tunnels, and airlifted to the surface. Our computer centers and control links are there, too. It’s what made the city so pleasant. For a busy city, we had little traffic.”

“Yes, it was a wonderful city to stroll in,” Obi-Wan said as the craft neared landing. “Your cafés and restaurants were always full of talk and music.”

“And our parks held the laughter of our children,” Euraana agreed, her gaze quietly sweeping over the city. “All gone.” She pointed in the distance. “There is the quarter where the crimelord Striker rules. He is known by that name because of the projectile pistols his gang used for their first raid. Strikers are not sophisticated weapons, but they won the battle. Now they are better armed, of course. He is reputed to have the most extensive weapons cache of all the crimelords.”

Obi-Wan leaned over to look at the quarter of the city that Euraana had indicated. Garish blue and green glowlights were hung from poles to cast their eerie light on the streets. Half-destroyed buildings were rebuilt with inexpensive, brightly colored plastoid materials. The replacements were slapped onto old buildings built of polished stone, making a tawdry contrast. This quarter did have a few beings in its streets, with state-of-the-art speeders sporting shiny paint and flashing lights moving

Jude Watson

through the streets and cafés full of beings. It was obvious that there was trading going on. The progress of their transport was watched with calculating eyes.

“What are they buying and selling?” Anakin asked.

Euraana shrugged. “Weapons. Spice. Illegal medicines they will sell to the unfortunates in the galaxy. Fortunes are being made down there. And those fortunes are built on the ashes of our civilization.”

“No longer,” Yaddle said softly. She had talked little on the journey and had spent much of it meditating. Now the sharp gaze from her green-brown eyes seemed to give strength to Euraana, who nodded. Although Yaddle was small in size, her presence loomed large.

Without air traffic guidelines, the Senate pilot didn’t need clearance or coordinates. The landing platforms for the city had all been destroyed. He set the cruiser down in a large courtyard of a formerly impressive living complex, carefully avoiding the rubble.

Obi-Wan watched Anakin as his Padawan grabbed his survival pack and waited with the others for the ramp to lower. Usually at the start of a new mission Anakin’s eyes were alive with curiosity. Obi-Wan had always appreciated how his Padawan threw himself into a new situation, using all of his senses to gather information. But Anakin’s expression looked shuttered.

He walked beside him as they exited the craft. “Any impressions?” He was always interested to hear what Anakin had picked up. The Force spoke to Anakin in a different way than anyone Obi-Wan had ever known.

Anakin shook his head. “Nothing to speak of. I feel the dark side of the Force, of course. That’s clear.”

“And to be expected,” Obi-Wan said. “What about your vision? Any connections?”

Anakin shook his head. “Nothing.”

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

There were shadows between them now. He could see them in the way Anakin held his shoulders, the way his eyes spoke. It wasn't as though Anakin didn't meet his gaze directly. But his gaze was like glass. Obi-Wan found himself sliding off it into uncertainty.

He knew he was partly responsible. Ever since Andara he had held himself back from his Padawan. His anger had gone, but it had been replaced with caution. He had wanted to give Anakin room, time to reflect without the pressure of his own opinions and interpretations. He knew he could be heavy-handed at times. He remembered Qui-Gon, how his own Master had sometimes withdrawn his focus on him and gone to a place Obi-Wan could not reach. It had sometimes left Obi-Wan feeling stranded, but it had forced him to come to terms with his own feelings. He wanted to do the same for Anakin. His Padawan was sixteen now. It was time for him to achieve a deeper connection to his core.

Anakin had been wrong on Andara. The fact that he had concealed the disappearance of a Jedi still astonished Obi-Wan. His actions did not take away from the fact that Anakin was special. When he made mistakes, they were big ones. His need to be perfect, to be powerful, was a flaw. Try as he might, Obi-Wan could not show Anakin that if he held himself back, everything would come to him. Anakin just kept pushing.

He resolved to work out some of their differences on this mission. They were on a journey together, and for each phase they would develop different rhythms, different paces. Anakin needed to understand that. A little distance between them didn't mean that the core was threatened.

"Our contacts are meeting us nearby," Euraana Fall said. "This way."

The Jedi picked their way through the rubble of the courtyard and followed Euraana down the dark street, leaving the pilot and cruiser behind. "Better not use a glow rod," she said. "No need

Jude Watson

to attract attention. This part of the city isn't used much. It will be a good place for us to set up operations."

She led them to a building that seemed miraculously untouched by the signs of war, until they entered and saw that part of the rear portion had been blown out. The domed ceiling was half destroyed. Stars littered the sky above, thrown like mineral dust on shimmersilk.

"This was once a meeting hall." Euraana's voice echoed in the space. "I attended lectures here, and concerts. There are still offices and even a café here. We can make it work."

Two forms separated from the shadows. Obi-Wan tensed, but he saw almost immediately that they were friendly. They were most likely the Mawan contacts. They were both short, muscular men with pale complexions and long hair that was tied back with metal clasps. One of the men had gleaming dark hair, the other snowy white.

The shorter one with the white hair and youthful face gave a short nod to Euraana and held out his hand, palm out, in the Mawan gesture of friendship and welcome. "Glad to see you made it." His voice rumbled like a balky sublight engine.

"Greetings to you, Swanny," Euraana said to the white-haired man. Then she faced the dark-haired Mawan and said, "Hello, Rorq." Euraana turned and introduced the two to the Jedi party. The two men nodded greetings.

"Swanny and Rorq were tunnel workers before the war," Euraana explained. "They live below. The tunnel workers have agreed to help us, and they are their representatives."

"I'm afraid I haven't been thoroughly briefed," Obi-Wan said politely. "Tunnel workers?"

Swanny bristled. "What's wrong with that?"

Euraana said quickly, "Let me explain. Before the war, the tunnel workers were...well, near the bottom of the social structure—"

"Meaning the high-and-mighties looked down on us," Rorq said, crossing his thick arms. "Called us subrats."

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

“Even though we kept everything running for them,” Swanny added with a cynical twist to his mouth.

“So the order of things,” Euraana said, holding her hand up and flipping it over, “is now reversed.”

“Subrats on top,” Swanny said. “It’s a sweet thing.”

“The citizens below depend on the tunnel workers to bring provisions and keep their generators going,” Euraana continued. “They have practically fashioned a city down below.”

“We saved their hides,” Rorq growled.

“We’ve gotten a taste of power, and we like it,” Swanny said. “Not only that, we’re good at it. So we’d like to be involved in the rebuilding of Naatan. Not from the bottom, though. Things have changed.”

“Everything has changed,” Euraana said quietly.

“Before the Purge, Euraana here wouldn’t have given me the time of day,” Swanny said. “Now she has to deal with me.”

“Oh?” Euraana said, cocking an eyebrow. “Do you know me so well, Swanny Mull? Enough to call me a snob and an opportunist in one breath?”

Swanny grinned and held up his hands. “Maybe I spoke too soon.”

“Maybe you should stick to things you know about,” Euraana snapped in a tart tone. “The crimelords, for example.” She turned to the others. “The tunnel workers serve as go-betweens. The citizens are forced to buy their food and goods from the crimelords in temporary markets set up below in the tunnels. The tunnel workers set it up.” She gave Swanny an icy glance. “They are paid by the crimelords for their services, as well as by the citizens.”

“Why shouldn’t we be paid?” Swanny asked mildly. “We take the risks.”

“Tell us about the crimelords,” Obi-Wan said. If he didn’t step in, he had a feeling Euraana and Swanny would trade taunts for hours. “Who is the most dangerous? Who is the most powerful? Sometimes they aren’t one and the same.”

Jude Watson

Swanny frowned. “Most of the criminals in Naatan are low-level types working for bosses. I’d say your three biggest problems are Striker, Feeana Tala, and Decca.”

“Let’s start with Decca,” Obi-Wan said.

“She’s a Hutt,” Rorq said with a shudder. “The daughter of Gardulla. Decca took over Gardulla’s organization when she died. Her center of operations used to be on C-Foroon, near Tatooine, but she got chased off. She came here and brought her goons with her. She’s mainly in the spice trade.”

“But she has a personal grudge against Striker,” Swanny said. “He hit her operation within days of arriving on Mawan. Grabbed control of the power grid and a warehouse full of weapons. But Decca’s got the edge in transport. She controls most of the main tunnels. She stole most of Naatan’s transports when she arrived and she’s managed to hold on to them.”

“The only trouble is, she doesn’t have fuel for them,” Rorq said. “Striker keeps raiding her fuel supplies, just to make her angry. He doesn’t need that much fuel. He doesn’t have as many transports.”

“Nobody knows who Striker is?” Anakin asked.

Swanny shook his head. “Not many have even seen him. His operators were in control for years, and he only dropped in from time to time. But he’s been spending all of his time here lately.” He nodded at Obi-Wan. “I’d say he was the most powerful. And dangerous.”

“And Feeana Tala?” Yaddle asked. “A native of Mawan, she is.”

Rorq nodded. “She controls most of the goods and services that are sold to the citizens below. Small potatoes for the other crimelords.”

“Still, they raid her when they feel like it,” Swanny said. “They want to control as much of what happens on Mawan as they can. Decca wants Striker off-planet, and he wants the same for her. Feeana’s edge is that she knows the tunnels below almost as well as we do.”

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

Euraana looked at Yaddle. "So what is our first step?"

"Return and take back the city, the citizens must," Yaddle said. "So control of the power grid we must have."

"You'll have to guarantee their safety," Euraana said.

Yaddle turned to her and blinked in a gesture that was very much like Yoda's. "Guarantee, you say? Guarantees, there never are." She spread her hands. "Help them we will. Courage must they find themselves."

Euraana nodded. "If we can get the power grid back, we might be able to persuade them to leave the tunnels. And if there was at least some progress with the crimelords—"

"That is our job," Obi-Wan said, indicating himself and Anakin. "They must be told that if they don't voluntarily leave the planet, Senate security forces will make them go."

"If the Senate will send them," Euraana said worriedly. "They still have not agreed."

"Agree they will, if take back the city we can," Yaddle said.

"What if the crimelords don't listen to talk?" Swanny asked. "In my experience, they seldom do."

"We have to find a reason to make them listen," Obi-Wan said. "Everyone is vulnerable somewhere. For now we just need to learn more about their operations."

"Swanny and Rorq can help you there," Euraana said. "Aboveground has been so destroyed that even the crimelords have bunkers belowground."

"Safer down there in case something bad happens," Swanny said. He grinned at Obi-Wan and Anakin. "We know just about everything that goes on down there."

"Take us below," Obi-Wan said. "We'll be in touch while you take care of the power grid," he said to Yaddle. Yaddle nodded good-bye.

"If you'll follow me." Swanny gave a bow to the Jedi that held a hint of mockery.

Obi-Wan and Anakin strode after the two. Obi-Wan's instincts were on alert. He had his doubts about the value of

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Swanny and Rorq's assistance. They were scruffy, rude, and probably untrustworthy.

Qui-Gon would have befriended them instantly.

Chapter Three

Anakin walked with Obi-Wan, following Swanny through the dark streets to an industrial part of Naatan, an area made even darker by the presence of the shells of unlighted buildings looming overhead. Swanny led them to a booth that was a tall cylinder made of opaque black glass in a passage between two former warehouses.

“This is a forced air tube,” Swanny said. “We use them instead of turbolifts. If you’ve never been on one, it can feel a little strange. You step out on air, and the pressure lessens, dropping you below.” He opened a control panel and punched in a level and a speed. “I’ll keep it slow for your first time. Just don’t ever turn the control to ‘eject.’ That’s what we used to get rid of toxic substances—we’d just blast them into the atmosphere. The roof of the cylinder retracts, and you’d find yourself lost in the clouds.”

“Are there many levels below?” Obi-Wan asked.

“About twenty,” Rorq said. “And the tunnels extend over the entire area of Naatan. It’s like another city down there. You’ll see.”

Rorq stepped into the air tube with no floor. He hung there for a second, grinning at them, then shot below.

Swanny gestured. “After you.”

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan stepped out into what seemed to be a black void. Anakin heard the faint sound of rushing air. The next thing he knew, his Master had sunk down out of sight.

“Next,” Swanny said.

Anakin stepped into the chamber. It felt strange to feel the air pressure against his boots. He descended, the air rushing against his ears. The sensation felt oddly familiar, even though he’d never been in an airlift before. When he reached the bottom he felt the shock of the ground against his boots and almost stumbled as he stepped off.

Obi-Wan and Rorq were waiting. After a moment, Swanny joined them, stepping off the airlift with the ease of long practice.

“Ah,” Swanny said, spreading his arms to take in the dim, dirty tunnel, “home, sweet home.”

Anakin wrinkled his nose. The air was dank and heavy and smelled stale.

Swanny grinned. “The purification system is hooked into the power grid. Sometimes it’s off, sometimes it’s on. Lately it’s been off.”

Swanny activated a glow rod and they set off down the tunnel. It was wide and high, big enough for the four of them to walk side by side.

“This is one of the main transport tunnels,” Swanny explained. “We used to have speeders operating along here. Now we motor the old-fashioned way.”

Obi-Wan glanced around at the network of tunnels branching off from the one they were walking down. “I don’t know how you keep from getting lost.”

“There are map kiosks, but when the power’s down, we can’t access them,” Rorq said. “Luckily, we could find our way around down here blindfolded. Patrol, Swanny.”

Quickly, Swanny deactivated the glow rod. Rorq dived into a side tunnel and Swanny urged them through the opening. They pressed against the walls of the side tunnel as a speeder slowly

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

made its way down the main tunnel. Two guards sat, blaster rifles at the ready.

“Better to avoid them,” Swanny whispered. “Decca’s crew.”

“Does she run patrols frequently?” Obi-Wan asked.

“I’d say randomly,” Swanny said. “She doesn’t have enough fuel for regular patrols, so she counts on surprise. She’s always looking to round up some of Striker’s men if she can. They capture you and ask questions later. I’d rather avoid a rifle butt on the scalp, thank you.”

They walked back into the main tunnel. “The substations are where the main computer relays used to be,” Swanny said, holding the glow rod high so that they could pick their way down the tunnel. “Most of them have been destroyed in blaster shoot-’em-up battles. There are also docking bays for our once-gleaming fleet of transports. Decca controls most of the docking bays. And the rest of the crimelords have taken over most of the substations.”

“Where do the Mawans live?” Anakin asked.

“They took over a half-dug-out area that was supposed to be another loading bay before the Purge. They set up a kind of tent village there. We subrats serve as scouts to protect them from raids. We also ferry food, water, and other supplies.”

“For a fee,” Obi-Wan said.

Swanny nodded. “A small fee, just to cover costs. We have to pay bribes to the crimelords.”

“Who controls the power grid now?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Striker, at the moment,” Swanny said. “That could change. The main generator is in a substation down here. Striker has it guarded.”

“Can’t you switch power from the main substation to another?” Anakin asked.

Swanny shrugged. “Technically, yes. But it’s not easy. They’ll need a lot of luck to boost the system from another source. Plus there’s a relay substation that will shut the whole system down if procedure isn’t followed. Nobody wants to do that, even the

Jude Watson

crimelords. Too much risk that the entire system would never restart. They all want to control the power grid. They don't want to destroy it."

"What did you do before the Purge, Swanny?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I'm a water rat," Swanny said cheerfully. "I programmed all the wastewater systems. I know every pipe down here, just about. Rorq here was on fuel transport tunnels."

"Barely got paid a living wage to keep the surface running," Rorq grumbled.

Swanny clapped an arm around Rorq's shoulders. "Ah, but it was a sweet life, wasn't it, my friend? Low life expectancy, no bonuses, the contempt of our fellow citizens—you've got to admit, you miss it."

Rorq shook his head. "You're crazy."

"That's why I'm happy," Swanny said with a twisted grin. "How else do I stay sane?"

"Why are you working with us?" Obi-Wan asked curiously. "If the citizens take back Naatan, there's every chance you could end up underground again."

"True words," Swanny said. "Most of the tunnel workers are hanging back. They won't give their support. They like the power they have, even if they're operating under a corrupt system that could get them killed at any moment. Call me crazy, but I want to live long enough to see the sun again. Naatan will be returned to the Mawans one day. I'm sure of that. If I help the right people, I'll be rewarded." He grinned. "Just call me a visionary with a deep interest in my own well-being."

"If you like," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin could see by the expression on Obi-Wan's face that his Master was amused by Swanny. It never failed to surprise him when his proper Master loosened up with some sort of odd character.

"Now, where would you Jedi like to start?" Swanny asked. "Naturally, Rorq and myself would prefer to keep ourselves out

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

of any extremely dangerous scenarios, but we're ready for almost anything."

"We need to observe the systems they've set up, how they operate," Obi-Wan said. "I don't want them to know the Jedi are here, not yet. It doesn't pay to present a deal until you know what's important to your adversary."

Rorq looked nervous. "You mean infiltrate their hideouts?"

"Unless you can think of another way," Obi-Wan said.

"Down, boy," Swanny said absently to Rorq. His eyes narrowed as he thought, and he stopped walking. "We arrange temporary markets for Feeana. Set up a time and place for the Mawans to buy and trade. There's one tonight. She's the one who deals with us most often. Doesn't cheat the Mawans quite as much as the others. If you keep your hoods over your faces and don't attract attention to yourselves, you could pass for Mawans. Feeana will probably be there. She likes to keep an eye on things."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Let's go."

Swanny and Rorq led them through the maze of tunnels, walking fast and purposefully now. They descended several levels and twisted through a small network of tunnels that suddenly opened out into a large space.

It had once been used for storage, that was clear. Open shelving was built into the curving durasteel wall frames. Plastoid bins lined one wall. Everything was empty. Instead, blankets were spread out on the scuffed floor of the space, and a ragtag assortment of items were spread out. Fruit that was past its prime, flour, some battered kitchen items, a broken warming unit. Folded thermal capes, their edges ragged and torn. An old pair of boots.

The Mawans wandered among the goods. Anakin saw how their eyes lingered hungrily on the different items, how their hands dangled uselessly by their sides or how they fingered empty purses hung on belts. The last time he had seen such hopelessness had been in the slave quarters on Tatooine.

Jude Watson

“They can’t afford anything, but they come anyway,” Swanny said.

Bored gang members, blaster rifles in their hands, stood against the walls, some leaning and trying not to doze.

Across the space a Mawan female sat astride a battered durasteel box, her hand resting lightly on her blaster holster. She was younger than Anakin had imagined, about Obi-Wan’s age, he guessed, and she looked wiry and tough. She wore a comlink headset and spoke rapidly into it while her eyes scanned the room. Anakin kept his hood forward to conceal his face. Without the telltale blue veins of a Mawan, he would be identified immediately as an outsider.

He and Obi-Wan kept their heads down and shuffled along with the others. Anakin knew his Master was trying to get closer, hoping to overhear whatever directions Feeana was giving on her headset.

He looked at her with a sidelong glance and saw how sharply she was watching the crowd. Her gaze slowly dropped, and suddenly, she stood and leaped. The strength and power of the leap surprised him. She landed only centimeters away from him and Obi-Wan.

“Spies!” she cried, her blaster leveled at Obi-Wan’s chest. “Surround them!”

Chapter Four

Feeana's quick action didn't extend to her troops. A leader with a headset sputtered toward them, trying to corral others to follow. Anakin knew that his Master could have foiled them in seconds, but he waited for them to approach. Soon they were surrounded by twenty members of Feeana's gang, and twenty blasters were pointed in their direction.

Anakin glanced at his Master. Obi-Wan said nothing. His gaze was calm and watchful. Anakin knew his Master's strategy usually centered on waiting. Obi-Wan could strike faster than any Jedi he knew, but he could also wait longer than any Jedi should have to, in Anakin's opinion. Especially when a blaster was pointed at his heart.

Still, he was an apprentice, and his job was to follow his Master's lead.

"You're from Decca's gang," Feeana said. "Don't bother denying it."

Feeana whirled toward Swanny and Rorq, who were both backing away with careful steps.

"Swanny and Rorq brought them," she said.

Immediately, ten of the twenty blasters turned on Swanny and Rorq.

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“Whoa,” Swanny said, holding up two hands while Rorq bared his teeth in a nervous grin. “We just walked in at the same time.”

“Never saw them before in our lives,” Rorq said through clenched teeth.

“We’re not spies,” Obi-Wan said. “We’re Jedi. We’re here for diplomacy, not battles.”

“Prove it,” Feeana sneered.

Only by a small expression did Obi-Wan reveal how annoyed he was at the request. He put out a hand, and Feeana’s headset flew off her head and directly into his grasp.

Obi-Wan spoke crisply into the headset. “Cancel all orders. Take a vacation.”

The gang members looked at one another. The leader of the group, who was wearing a comlink headpiece, put a hand to his ear, as if unable to quite believe that Obi-Wan had just given an order.

Anakin could hear confused exclamations and questions faintly coming from the headpiece in Obi-Wan’s hand. He suppressed his grin.

Feeana tilted her head in a short nod of appreciation. “Okay, you’re a Jedi. Now, can I have my comlink back? They’re hard to come by.”

Obi-Wan tossed it to her. Feeana spoke into it. “Hold your positions until further notice.” She glanced at the Jedi. “So you’re here for diplomacy. Let’s talk.”

Feeana led the way to a corner. She pulled up a durasteel bin and overturned another for a makeshift seating area. Then she motioned to the Jedi to sit down. She looked at Obi-Wan expectantly.

“The Senate has sent a Provisional Government Committee for Mawan,” Obi-Wan said. “They are aboveground right now. Senate security forces are expected within a matter of days.”

“In other words, they’re finally going to do something,” Feeana said.

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said. “Mawan cannot remain an open world. After the crimelords are put out of business, the Senate will arrange for a transfer of power to the Mawans.”

Feeana put her hands on her hips. “So what do you want from me?”

“We hope that the crimelords will voluntarily either dissolve their gangs or move off-planet,” Obi-Wan said. “Your choice. There’s no other.”

“And what do I get?” Feeana asked.

“You get to avoid going up against the Jedi and an extremely well-armed security force,” Obi-Wan said.

Feeana gave him a shrewd look. “You’ll have to come up with something better than that, Jedi. Surely you know that deals have high stakes when one side has nothing to lose.”

“Why don’t you tell me what you want?” Obi-Wan suggested. “It will save time.”

Anakin admired his Master’s cool. Obi-Wan seemed to know what Feeana was thinking. He himself had no idea.

“Amnesty,” Feeana said. “I’m a native Mawan. I don’t want to go off-planet. I’m not really a crimelord. Think of me as a thief who does well. And you tell me what other choice I had. Because of the greedy leadership of my government, I lost my home. I was forced underground. At first, I stole to feed my family. Then I stole to feed other families. Then I needed a cut of what I stole in order to keep stealing. Then I needed a few others to help. Before I knew it I had a gang. I supply the Mawans with what they need to survive. Without me they’d be at the mercy of Decca and Striker. At least I am loyal to Mawan. I am a Mawan first, a criminal second. Amnesty shouldn’t be hard to give.”

“I think that can be arranged,” Obi-Wan agreed. “What else?”

“A promise,” Feeana said. “No doubt this Provisional Committee will be involved in setting up the Mawan government. Insiders will get the best jobs. I want to be part of that group.”

Jude Watson

“A moment,” Obi-Wan said. He stepped away to activate his comlink. Anakin watched as he spoke quietly into it. Then he returned and nodded at Feeana. “Your request is granted. And in return, you are expected to move to the surface with your group to serve as a temporary security force while the Provisional Committee works on getting control of the power grid.”

“Hold that comlink,” Feeana said. “I’m not doing anything until I’m sure you’re going to succeed.”

“I don’t think you’re in a position to make demands,” Obi-Wan said. “You have to earn your amnesty by proving your loyalty to your homeworld. Didn’t you just say you were a Mawan first, or am I mistaken? And if I were you, I’d want to make a generous gesture that will win you support later.”

He held her gaze. Anakin watched the battle of wills. He had no doubt who would win.

“All right,” Feeana agreed at last. “I’ll do it.”

She moved off to speak into her comlink. Anakin let go of the breath he didn’t realize he was holding.

“One down,” he murmured to Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan gazed after Feeana. “Maybe. We’ll have to move fast to keep her loyalty. If she feels we might lose control of Naatan, she’ll go back on the deal. We have to neutralize Decca and Striker, and fast.”

Chapter Five

Swanny and Rorq rushed across the hall. “My friend, that was a sweet thing to watch,” Swanny congratulated him. “You stared down Feeana and won. If I had a hat, it would be off to you.”

“Excellent diplomacy,” Rorq echoed in a gush of obvious flattery. “I learned a lot just watching you.”

“Thanks,” Obi-Wan said dryly. “Your support means a lot.”

“Anytime,” Swanny assured him.

“Particularly for the part where you pretended not to know us,” Obi-Wan added.

“What can I say?” Swanny said. “My survival mechanism just kicked in. I run on instinct. Can’t control it. I want to be brave, but something happens, and I open my mouth and a womp weasel starts talking. Nothing personal.”

“Sure,” Obi-Wan said. “But you owe me one.”

Swanny and Rorq looked nervous. “And what would that ‘one’ be?” Swanny asked cautiously.

“Help us infiltrate Decca’s camp,” Obi-Wan said. “That means you come, too. If I know Hutts, we won’t be able to bargain the way we did with Feeana. Decca won’t willingly agree to vacate the planet. We’ll have to find the flaw in her organization, some way to smash it, or at least make things too

Jude Watson

difficult for her to stick around. That means we have to get right in the middle of things and see how they're done."

"We can certainly give you the location of Decca's camp," Swanny said. "That is no problem."

"And your awesome Jedi skills would no doubt allow you to smuggle yourself in," Rorq added helpfully.

Obi-Wan just waited.

"I can see that you are looking for more from us," Swanny said.

"Which you already promised," Obi-Wan said. "Unless you'd like to take this up with the Provisional Committee."

"Noooo," Swanny said, drawing the word out. "Don't think I'd want to do that. Maybe there is a way to get you inside. There's a revel tonight."

"A revel?" Anakin asked.

"Decca won a skirmish today with Striker," Swanny said. "She always throws a big party so her gang can celebrate. Food, drink, music...and that's where Rorq and I come in. I just have one question."

Obi-Wan and Anakin waited.

"Can you sing?" Swanny asked.

The band was called Swanny and the Rooters. Swanny told the Jedi that they had played at many of Decca's revels. If they showed up at this one, Decca would assume that someone from her gang had booked them. They would be taking a chance, but not a very big one.

Obi-Wan and Anakin had to take the place of the other two band members. Swanny handed Obi-Wan a vioflute and Anakin a keyboard.

"Just fake it," he told them. "I'm so good no one will notice you can't play."

They set up in a corner of the vast substation while swaggering beings from all over the galaxy chugged flameouts

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

while feasting on meat and pastries. A Whipid, his fur matted with sweat and chunks of food, handed two mugs of grog to a Kamarian, who rested one on his tusk and downed the other.

“Fun crowd,” Anakin muttered to Obi-Wan.

“Just what I was thinking,” Obi-Wan said through his teeth. He settled onto a stool, resting the vioflute uneasily against his shoulder. It had been surprisingly easy to crash the party—but that didn’t mean the rest would be easy.

Anakin sat next to him, holding his handheld keyboard. He would have to pretend to play it. Swanny and Rorq needed backup singers, however.

“Just a few ‘whee-whoas’ on the choruses,” Swanny swiveled around to tell them. “No solos or anything. You can follow along, can’t you?”

“Of course,” Obi-Wan assured him.

Swanny and Rorq ripped into a lively song, and Anakin’s foot began to tap. He was surprised to find that they were good musicians.

Swanny winked at him. “Wastewater is my life, but music is a close second.”

Decca the Hutt entered the room and heaved her enormous bulk onto a repulsorlift platform obviously crafted for her, large and low and festooned with shimmersilk pillows. Her lieutenants surrounded her, jockeying for position as she settled herself in. There were three, one of them a Kamarian who sat at her right, obviously her most trusted assistant. His two tails waved as he leaned over to speak directly in her ear.

“I wish we could hear what he’s saying,” Obi-Wan murmured, pretending to pluck the strings on his vioflute.

“Sing,” Swanny hissed as he and Rorq swung into the chorus.

Anakin began to hum the backup, and beside him, Obi-Wan joined in. Unfortunately, Obi-Wan could not manage to find the melody. Swanny shot him a horrified look.

“Uh, not so loud,” he hissed. “Maybe you shouldn’t sing, after all.”

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Anakin hid his smile. He was glad his Master wasn't good at *everything*.

"Look in the corner behind Decca," Obi-Wan said to Anakin under his breath. "There's a bank of datapads. I wonder if we could get close enough to take a look at what's on them."

"If she keeps downing those flameouts, we might," Anakin said.

"Notice how she's listening to the Kamarian, while the Ranat tries to get closer."

Anakin watched. The Kamarian adjusted the pillows for Decca with his four arms while he spoke. He had Decca's full attention. It was almost comical the way the meter-tall Ranat tried to nestle into the folds of Decca's fat in order to hear what was being said.

Anakin wasn't sure what conclusions to draw from what he saw. But he knew that later his Master would ask him about his observations, so he watched carefully as Decca conferred and nodded. Then he slowly gazed around the room, noting the side tunnels and the placement of guards. He estimated there must be at least forty gang members at the party, which meant there were others on the surface and serving as guards. But how many? No doubt during their break they would be able to mingle in the crowd.

Decca signaled to Swanny, and he stopped playing. Decca held out her huge arms. Her flesh trembled. The substation fell silent.

"We hear the Jedi have arrived on Mawan with a Provisional Committee from the Senate," Decca pronounced. "Foolish beings—they think they can get rid of us."

The gang soldiers laughed and pounded the hilts of their blaster rifles on the floor.

"They will regret coming up against Decca the Hutt. I vow to you today, no committee will blast me off this planet!" Decca suddenly stood, her flesh waving. "Tell the galaxy—Decca will never retreat!"

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

“Well, I didn’t think diplomacy would work for Decca, anyway,” Obi-Wan muttered. “Let’s mingle. We’ll look for an opening to get to that datapad bank.”

Anakin had been hoping for a chance to hit the food table. His last meal had been a protein pack on the transport. What his teachers at the Temple had seemed to leave out of their lessons was that on missions, you never got enough food. He placed his keyboard on the floor.

At that moment, an explosion blew them both off their stools. Smoke filled the substation. The ping of blaster fire suddenly filled the air.

“Stay down!” Obi-Wan shouted to Anakin. “We’re under attack!”

Chapter Six

The smoke was so thick and acrid that Obi-Wan's eyes streamed tears. All he could glimpse through the haze was the blur of movement and the flash of blaster fire. Hoarse shouting and battle cries almost smothered the sound of Swanny shouting, "Whoa, show's over!"

He leaned closer to Anakin. "This could be an opportunity for us," he said rapidly. "No doubt Decca has an escape plan for just this kind of attack. She'll take off and we might be able to get to those datapads. Use the Force to guide you through the smoke."

Keeping his head low, he threw himself into the brawl. Decca's gang members were literally fighting blind, their eyes screwed shut and streaming tears. This didn't stop them from firing their weapons, however. Blaster fire pinged and ricocheted around the room. Obi-Wan glided through the forest of arms and legs, allowing the Force to tell him when to raise his lightsaber to deflect fire. He sensed that the rival gang was moving steadily toward Decca, trying to get to her before she escaped. Obi-Wan had no doubt that Striker was behind the attack, most likely in retaliation for Decca's victory earlier that day.

The barrage of fire was constant, shrieking by his ears and filling the room with more sparks and heat. Electrojabbers waved

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

in the air, and he saw one land by accident on another member of Decca's gang who was firing his blaster rifle in the air. The gang member went down, his legs paralyzed for a good two hours or more. He managed to drag himself away from a Phlog who was stomping toward the blaster fire, swinging a vibroax. Screams and battle cries filled the air.

It was a demonstration of sloppy fighting, Obi-Wan judged. Decca's gang might be large and fierce, but it certainly wasn't organized. Striker's soldiers were more efficient, moving slowly but surely toward the corner where Decca had been. Now the smoke was so thick it was impossible to tell where she had gone.

A panicked voice panted by his ear. "Wherever you're going, take me with you."

"Swanny, what are you doing?" Obi-Wan asked, whirling his lightsaber to deflect a sudden barrage of blaster fire. "Stay by the band platform, you'll be safe there."

"Are you kidding? There *is* no band platform. Some Phlog stepped on it on the way to Striker's gang."

"We're sunk," Rorq said, suddenly appearing as he crawled up to Obi-Wan. "You've got to get us out of here."

Obi-Wan looked down at them, exasperated. The Force surged, and he quickly whirled around to slice an electrojabber in half, held by a Decca gang member who had mistaken him for an enemy.

He had to get to those datapads. He couldn't do that and protect Swanny and Rorq.

Obi-Wan leaped closer to Swanny, protecting him from a sudden barrage of fire from a repeating blaster. The fire was fast and furious. Obi-Wan had to twirl his lightsaber in a continuous motion. He called out to the Force, using it to slow down time so that he could see each individual blaster shot. Where was Anakin?

As if his thought had conjured him, Anakin appeared through the smoke. His lightsaber held high and constantly moving, he was leaping toward the repeating blaster, which some

Jude Watson

enterprising members of Striker's gang had set up against the wall.

Anakin hit the repeating blaster with both feet, using the split second between the blasts to make his strike. The blaster flew off its supports. Anakin came down, slicing the weapon in two.

Then he snaked his way back to Obi-Wan.

"Get Swanny and Rorq to safety," Obi-Wan shouted above the din. "I'm going to get to those records. As soon as they're safe, follow me." There was no time to come up with another plan. The smoke rolled toward him, and he plunged into it.

Instantly his eyes began to tear again, and he felt the smoke in his lungs, making his breathing difficult. He fought his way forward. Even in this smoke, it would be hard to hide a Hutt.

He had to step over the bodies of the dead and wounded. Obi-Wan tasted smoke and death in his mouth. He felt tiredness seep into his bones. Greed had that effect on him. He could better understand the Mawans, who had fought for ideas, than those who worked for the crimelords. Stamping out greed was impossible; controlling it was a never-ending task. His job would never be finished. In the middle of a battle such as this, a great tide of weariness could wash over him at the thought.

His battle mind had slipped. That wasn't good. Obi-Wan wrenched back his concentration. Suddenly the bank of datapads burst into flame. They had been hit by a grenade.

Obi-Wan stopped to consider what to do next. But he didn't have time to change his direction. A percussive force almost blasted him off his feet. The floor rose to meet him and he fell on one knee, his ears ringing. The size of the blast told him that it had been caused by a thermal detonator. More smoke filled the air, and he could hear screams and cries.

He leaped to avoid a sudden stab with a stun baton. His assailant disappeared into the smoke as quickly as he had appeared.

Obi-Wan decided to find Decca. If he followed her, he might discover her exit strategy and her backup plans. Perhaps she

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

would lead him to another hideout. He reached the end of the substation at last. He could just glimpse Decca lowering her bulk into a specially designed speeder, wider and larger than normal. The pilot jammed its throttle forward, and it sped down the back tunnel.

He had missed the chance to follow her by seconds. There was no other speeder in the tunnel to take.

Obi-Wan turned. The smoke was clearing. He saw the gang members lying on the floor, or sitting, their heads in their hands. Some who could still run had taken off after the retreating members of Striker's gang.

Swanny was holding out a hand, helping Rorq to rise. They had taken cover behind a garbage bin.

Obi-Wan scanned the crowd. Where was Anakin?

He hurried over to Swanny and Rorq. "Did Anakin follow the others?"

Swanny shook his head. "I don't know, I didn't see. He pushed us back here just before something very big exploded."

The thermal detonator. What if Anakin had been close to it?

Something lay on the floor nearby. Obi-Wan felt a terrible dread steal over him. Slowly, he walked forward and crouched down by the object.

He picked it up and ran his fingers over it. The hilt was caked with dust and one deep scar now marred the finish.

It was Anakin's lightsaber.

Chapter Seven

At least I'm alive, Anakin thought. I may be stupid, but I'm alive.

It was a very un-Jedi thought. Jedi did not berate themselves. Anakin didn't care. He felt stupid and careless. He tried to rearrange himself within the garbage container he found himself in, but there was no room, and whenever he moved, his shoulder sent out a scream of protest. He wasn't hurt badly. He had landed on his shoulder when the thermal detonator hit. He had seen it but not soon enough. It had exploded, and he'd been hit.

And dropped his lightsaber. Something a Jedi was never, ever supposed to do.

Now he was being brought somewhere. He had been dazed from the thermal detonator, picked up like a sack of onions, and dropped into a container on top of a pile of greasy bones from the feast. His assailant had ripped his utility belt off his tunic, so he'd lost his comlink, too. He had been banged down the tunnel, been thrown into a vehicle, and now was careening...somewhere.

He couldn't wait to hear what his Master would say about this one.

Things were bad enough with Obi-Wan. What would happen when he found out that Anakin had lost his lightsaber and been captured?

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

Anakin pictured the exchange.

I saw the thermal detonator too late, Master. It was a surprise.

There are no surprises when the Force is with you, my young Padawan.

Anakin grimaced. He couldn't wait for that one. If he ever got out of here.

He moved his fingers along the container. It was a standard-issue garbage bin. The lid was hinged and had a simple lock. If he could manage to get on his back, he might be able to kick the lid with enough power to shatter the lock.

He could try it. He was on fire to get out of this stinking prison. But thanks to Obi-Wan, he had learned how to wait.

He was almost certain that he'd been captured by Striker's gang. Without his lightsaber, he might not be taken for a Jedi. Perhaps he was one of many prisoners. He guessed that he would be taken to Striker's hideout. He could bide his time and observe. They were here to gather information, after all. Maybe he could discover something valuable about Striker, something they could use.

So maybe the best thing he could do was lie here and wait to be released.

As he had that thought, Anakin felt the speeder slow. It stopped, and the container was grabbed roughly, then dropped. Anakin had braced himself, but he banged his head on the side. Patience was hard to find now, with a smarting head, but he reached for it, calming himself for whatever lay ahead.

The container lid was yanked open. Rough hands reached in. Anakin let his body go slack. He was grabbed and slung over someone's shoulder, then dumped on the ground.

Anakin looked up into cruel yellow eyes.

"There's your welcome, slug." A giant Imbat smiled down at him with mossy teeth. Then he reached for his utility belt, where a pair of stun cuffs dangled. They looked like delicate bracelets in his huge hand. He slapped them on to Anakin. Then with a grunt, he simply turned and walked off.

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Anakin rose unsteadily to his feet. His shoulder still ached, and he could feel a lump rising on the side of his forehead near his left eye.

Around him, activity swirled, but no one paid him any attention. He was free to wander, but the stun cuffs guaranteed he would not be able to wander far. From what he could tell, he was the only prisoner.

Anakin did what he knew Obi-Wan would want him to do. He observed.

The substation was even larger than the one Decca had used. Banks of monitoring equipment, now unused, ran along one wall. Benches and chairs had been ripped from their floor supports and were piled in a corner. A weapons rack held an impressive array of small arms.

The gang members were busy and didn't even glance at him. Some were checking and cleaning weapons. Others sat at improvised computer stations, entering information. Others manned comm units. Everyone seemed to have a job. Compared to the slipshod air of Feeana's operation and the chaos and suppressed violence of Decca's, this seemed like a professional operation.

Which told him that of all three criminals, Striker was the one to worry about.

Anakin had no idea where he was. How would Obi-Wan ever be able to find him?

But he didn't want Obi-Wan to find him. Not until he had a chance to learn something. It would redeem him in his Master's eyes. Maybe he could discover something important and then escape.

Anakin drifted closer to the computer banks. He focused his attention on the fingers of a man entering information. He tapped into the Force to help him. He felt time slow down, and he tried to put words together from the letters the man was entering.

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

B I O...he missed several letters, someone walking by...P O
N

T O X

Frustrated, Anakin leaned forward to see. A huge hand suddenly landed on his sore shoulder, sending a fresh jolt of pain through his body. "The boss wants to see you."

Without checking to make sure that he was following, the Imbat loped across the space. He accessed a durasteel door that led to a room off the main substation. He waited for it to open, then shoved Anakin inside. The door slid shut behind him.

The room was almost empty except for a bare table and one chair. The man standing in front of him was smiling and holding out his hands. "Forgive my manner of bringing you, my friend. I was impatient to see you."

Anakin felt shock ripple through him.

It was their greatest enemy, Granta Omega.

Chapter Eight

“You want us to bring you to Striker’s hideout?” Swanny asked. “But no one knows where that is.”

“You said you knew where everyone was, and everything that went on,” Obi-Wan said.

“A slight exaggeration can often seal a deal,” Swanny said. “Note the word ‘hideout,’ however. That implies that something is hidden, doesn’t it?”

“Then we’re just going to have to find it,” Obi-Wan said.

“We?” Rorq asked. “What do we have to do with it?”

“Anakin came close to that thermal detonator because of the two of you,” Obi-Wan said. “He saved your lives.”

“And we’re sure he wouldn’t want us to lose them, after all the trouble he went to,” Rorq said earnestly.

“Look, Master Obi,” Swanny said. “The reason Striker is so effective is because nobody knows anything about him. They don’t know where he came from. They don’t know his name. They don’t know where he lives. They don’t know when he’ll strike again. There are kilometers and kilometers of tunnels, some of them half finished, and empty substations on the perimeters. He could be anywhere. And it’s not like we ever wanted to look very hard.”

“Then we’ll smoke him out,” Obi-Wan said.

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

“I think I’ve had enough smoke for one night,” Swanny said, rubbing his fingers along his smoke-blackened face.

“Not real smoke,” Obi-Wan said. “I mean provoke him so that he’ll come out into the open.”

“Provoke him?” Rorq moaned. “That doesn’t sound good.”

Obi-Wan was feeling on the edge of his patience. He should have stayed with Anakin when they were under attack. Now he did not know if Anakin was badly wounded or worse.

He remembered feeling so angry on Andara. *I thought you’d be proud of me*, Anakin had said. And he had wanted to reply that he was proud, that Anakin’s progress astonished him, that there was so much about Anakin that he admired. Instead he had held his tongue, thinking there would be a better time. He did not want to praise Anakin when his apprentice had made such an error.

But maybe he should have. That better time had not arrived.

“Where is Striker most vulnerable?” he asked Swanny.

“I have no idea,” Swanny said. “Nowhere, if I had to guess. He’s got personal guards that surround him at all times. Plus surveillance, weapons, assassins, a huge army...can I stop now?”

Obi-Wan’s comlink signaled. He snatched it up eagerly.

“Speak with you, I must,” Yaddle said. “At the airlift, meet we will.”

“Of course,” Obi-Wan said. “But I was just about to contact you. Anakin is missing. I think Striker has taken him.”

Yaddle hesitated for only a beat. He could feel her concern. Then she said slowly, “Your problem, my problem—fix each other, they might.”

Swanny and Rorq seemed relieved at the diversion. They were happy to lead him to the airlift.

Yaddle stepped off the airlift with the graceful, gliding step that never seemed to abandon her, even when she was tired or impatient.

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“In addition to the mainframe substation of the power grid, taken over another crucial station, Striker has,” she said. “Substation 32, a central relay station. Crucial it is as a network point for restarting the grid.”

Swanny nodded. “That’s right. He can override the power surge you need for start-up from that substation.”

“Retake it, we must,” Yaddle confirmed.

“I was looking for a way to provoke Striker,” Obi-Wan said.

“That will do it,” Swanny muttered. “He just got that substation back from Decca tonight. I imagine he feels pretty good about it.”

“If we attack the substation, he’ll have to send reinforcements,” Obi-Wan said to Yaddle. “We can tail them back to the hideout.”

“Can I say something here?” Swanny asked. “Taking the substation is impossible. Just wanted to mention that.”

“What do you mean?” Obi-Wan asked.

“He has his best men protecting the power grid,” Swanny said. “His most explosive weapons. I’ve seen the Jedi in action and it’s a sweet sight, don’t get me wrong. But can two Jedi go up against grenade launchers and missile tubes?”

Obi-Wan exchanged a glance with Yaddle.

“There’s only one entrance to substation 32,” Swanny went on. “It’s the only way in. And you won’t go more than two meters before you’re blasted to pieces.”

“I guess that’s that, then,” Rorq said. “There’s no other way.”

Yaddle smiled. Obi-Wan turned to Swanny and Rorq.

“For the Jedi, there is always another way,” he said.

Chapter Nine

Don't let him see your surprise. Don't give him even a flicker of satisfaction.

“Oh, come on, Anakin,” Granta Omega said. “You’re surprised. Admit it. And maybe just a little bit pleased?” Omega smiled at him. Anakin was always mystified by his charm. He had liked him, once. Before he’d tried to kill Obi-Wan. Before it was clear that the dark side dominated his acts.

Granta Omega was out to lure a Sith into the open. He was not Force-sensitive, but he wanted to be close to the Force. He wanted to understand the source of such power. He would do anything to attract the one Sith he knew was at large in the galaxy. He was enormously wealthy, and would use anyone or anything to get what he wanted. Even the Jedi.

“I wouldn’t say pleased,” Anakin replied. “And I wouldn’t say surprised. I’d say very unhappy.”

Omega cocked his head and regarded Anakin. “I’m sorry to hear that. But I know that soon you’ll understand why we keep running into each other. You are strong in the Force. Stronger than any Jedi. Stronger than your Master—and he knows it. I’m still interested in the Sith, but I’m becoming even more interested in you.”

“The feeling isn’t mutual.”

Jude Watson

Omega strolled around the empty room. He was what was known as a “void,” a being who could neutralize his appearance and aura so completely that those who met him could not recall what he looked like. To Anakin, he’d seemed different each time they’d met. The first time he’d seen him, he’d appeared to be a weary bounty hunter. Anakin had also spent time with him when Omega was posing as a scientist named Tic Verdun. He’d had a haphazard, nervous manner then, and friendly brown eyes.

Now Anakin had the feeling he was seeing the real Granta Omega. His hair was dark and flowed to his shoulders. His eyes were a dark, deep blue, not brown as they’d appeared before. His body was slim but strong. And he looked younger, too, perhaps even younger than Obi-Wan.

“At least be impressed at how I’ve forgiven you,” Omega said. “You notice I don’t hold a grudge. You and your Master killed a good deal for me last time we met. I was close to cornering the market on bacta. I would have made a fortune. Instead I almost drowned in a tidal wave. Then I was forced to erase all my secret financial records. No hard feelings, though.”

“On your side, maybe,” Anakin said.

“As I was saying, that little adventure cost me. I had to make it up somehow. Planets like Mawan are made for beings like me. We can set up operations without too much interference. There’s no one to bribe, no one to fight. We just grab our piece. I already had some business interests here, so it was just a matter of coming myself and devoting all my effort to it. I’ve made up what I lost in just a few months.”

“Am I supposed to say congratulations now?” Anakin asked.

Omega sighed. “Still a Jedi,” he said. “Moons and stars, you can be boring. Your Master’s influence, no doubt.” He leaned against the table. “Can’t you relax? Not all Jedi are as rigid as your Master.”

“How would you know?”

“Some are interested in investigating deep in the archives and finding that the Jedi know more about the dark side than they

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

care to reveal. They don't waste their time meditating on favorite rocks in the Room of the Thousand Fountains or sneaking into the Council Receiving Room to watch the Senatorial starships dock in the restricted space lane."

"How do you know those things?" Anakin asked, startled. Only Jedi knew those things. They weren't important, but they were things that Padawans did.

"Maybe I know more about the Jedi than you," Omega said in a teasing tone. "Jealous?"

He laughed at the expression on Anakin's face. "You look worried. And angry. Didn't I suggest that you relax? You'd think you'd just gotten a reprimand from Rei Soffran."

Rei Soffran was a revered Jedi Master and a teacher of the intermediate students. He was legendary at the Temple for his tough lectures. When you were called to Rei Soffran's chamber, you knew your faults would be dissected and you'd be carved up like a roasted doisey bird.

But how did Omega know that?

Omega swung himself up on the table. He sat on the edge and faced Anakin, swinging his legs like a young boy. "Oh, come on, Anakin. You don't need Obi-Wan. You don't need the Council. Haven't you figured that out yet?"

Anakin thought of his last mission on Andara. He had infiltrated a group of students who acted as a secret squad, hiring themselves out on missions throughout the galaxy. They chose what they wanted to do. They answered to no one but themselves. Before it all fell apart, he had admired them and maybe envied them. It had felt like freedom. It had made him think what he would be like without having a Master or the Council to tell him what to do. He had shoved those thoughts deep into his mind, like a dirty tunic in his utility bag.

Something must have changed in his face, for Omega's eyes gleamed, becoming a sharp, clear blue. "You *have* figured that out." He continued to study him. "But you can't face it."

Anakin shook his head. "That's not true."

Jude Watson

Omega laughed. “I thought Jedi weren’t supposed to lie. You’ve got one foot on the dark path, Anakin. Are you sure you are meant to be a Jedi?”

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted,” Anakin said. The words came out without him wanting them to. They were in his head, as they always were.

“Yes, you were a special case,” Omega said. “I’ve heard the story. Chosen as a young boy. You were a slave, so of course you dreamed of a better life, a life you thought of as free. Welcome to reality, Anakin. Are you free?” Omega snorted. “If I held on to my dreams as a young boy, I’d be repairing starships for a living. I used to think that was exciting. How can you be so sure that your dream was the right one?”

“The dream is real because I am living it,” Anakin said.

“The dream,” Omega said softly, “was for opportunity and freedom and adventure. That is not the same thing. You began as a slave. Of course you dreamed of freedom. But you are not a boy now. You must know that the only thing that buys freedom in this life is wealth. I have it. I can give you more freedom than the Jedi can.”

Anakin shook his head. “I don’t want your brand of freedom.”

“Why not? I can do anything I want. Let me tell you, power is a good thing to have. It’s even fun. *You* could do anything you want. With my help, you could raise an army. You could return to the miserable planet of your birth and free your mother. Isn’t that your deepest wish? Why are the Jedi holding you back from it?”

Startled, Anakin remembered his vision. He had touched the cuffs on Shmi’s hands and they had fallen to the floor. It hadn’t been a vision of what would happen, he realized suddenly. It had been a vision of what could be.

What could be...

The thought flared up, searing him with promise. He thought of how he’d felt in the dream. So powerful, so sure. Closing his

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

hands over the remembered texture of Shmi's skin, seeing the light in her eyes when she saw him.

"Yes, Anakin Skywalker," Omega said softly. "I can give you the means to do it. We could leave here tomorrow if that's what you wished."

"No," Anakin said. *I am not listening to this. I am not hearing this.*

Omega pushed himself off the table. Anakin heard the slap of his boots on the floor, but he didn't look at his face. "Well, think about it. You don't have to leave the Jedi forever. You could give me a trial run. See how you like *real* freedom. You can always return to the Jedi. They're pretty desperate these days. They'll take you back."

"I will never give you anything," Anakin said.

"How about a deal? Something I want for something you want? I know the Jedi want me off-planet. I'm not sure if I'm ready to go, but if the Senate is going to get tangled up in Mawan politics, I'd be a fool to stay. Nevertheless, I have some demands. If you'll contact Yaddle and get her to come to a meeting here, I'll guarantee her safety."

"Who will guarantee yours?" Anakin shot back.

Omega chuckled. "You will. The fact that I'm holding a Jedi means that whoever is in charge up there won't send an army after me to 'negotiate.' I may be somewhat greedy, but I'm practical. I'm willing to move my operation. But Yaddle is the only one who can authorize my conditions. Set up the meeting. Then, while I make preparations to depart, you can decide whether you want to come with me."

"I don't have to make a decision. I know what I am. I know what I want."

Omega sighed. "You Jedi. Always so resolute." He shuddered. "All that self-righteousness gives me the spooks. Let me know if you'll set up the meeting. I'll arrange to bring your comlink to you."

He accessed the door and strode out into the busy substation. Anakin turned and watched him move across the room. He

Jude Watson

noticed how Omega quickly checked and conferred with his assistants as he walked. He made decisions quickly and moved on. The room hummed with activity. For the first time he saw how this man had amassed such a fortune.

How did Omega know such things about the Temple? Had he corrupted a Jedi? Had he infiltrated the Temple? Such things were unthinkable, but there had to be an explanation.

Omega's invitation for him to join his operation was laughable. Yet it had brought the vision freshly into his mind, and Anakin still felt the ache of it.

We could leave here tomorrow....

He could see her again. He could free her, and make sure she was well and safe. And then he could return to the Jedi. Omega said he could do that.

But the Jedi would not take him back if he did such a thing. Anakin knew that. Most likely Omega did, too. His offer was hollow at the core.

But was there truth there, too? Were the Jedi holding him back from his deepest wish?

And was he strong enough to face the answer?

Chapter Ten

Yaddle looked around the tunnel with distaste. “Too much time underground, I have spent,” she murmured lightly. “Glad I will be to see the sky again.”

Obi-Wan smiled at her humorous tone, but he knew there was truth behind Yaddle’s words. He remembered the words from Anakin’s vision: *The One Below remains below*. Yoda had interpreted it as a warning, and Obi-Wan agreed. Now Yaddle was belowground. What if the attack on the substation failed and something happened to Yaddle?

“I can handle this,” he told her. “You should go back.”

Yaddle shook her head at him. “Know what you are thinking, I do, Obi-Wan. Worried about your Padawan’s vision, I am not. Think you that I should run away?”

“That’s not what I meant, Master Yaddle,” Obi-Wan said respectfully. “I was just suggesting that—”

“That run away I should,” Yaddle interrupted. “Wasting time, we are.”

Obi-Wan had been corrected, and he accepted Yaddle’s rebuke. If he had been in her position, he would not have retreated, either. He turned to Swanny. “Didn’t you tell me that you can boost the grid from another source, but only if the central relay substation is destroyed?”

Jude Watson

“Right. Substation 32. That’s my point,” Swanny said patiently. “You might recall that I told you if you blow up the relay equipment, the whole power grid might blow. And that’s one sweet ka-boom. Kiss your lightsaber good-bye.”

Obi-Wan turned back to Yaddle. “If we hit substation 32, can your experts boost the grid right afterward? We can’t give Striker a chance to hit back.”

“Find out, we will.” Yaddle immediately got out her comlink.

Swanny looked at Obi-Wan curiously. “I don’t get it. How can two Jedi render an entire substation inoperable?”

“Well, we’ll need a hand,” Obi-Wan said. “That’s where you come in.”

“Me? You know I’d love to help, but I think you’ve seen my cowardice in action,” Swanny said.

“You won’t have to go near the substation,” Obi-Wan assured him.

Yaddle got off the comlink and nodded. “Do it, they can. Yet crucial, timing is. Destroy the relay substation we must within the hour. Impatient, Feeana is. Need her we do to patrol the city. Trust us, the Mawan citizens must. If we promise them that control of the power grid and the backing of Feeana and her gang will hold the city, aboveground they will come.” Yaddle paused. “An idea you have, Master Kenobi.”

It was a statement, not a question.

“We can’t blow it up,” Obi-Wan said. “But we could drown it.” He turned to Swanny. “Can you flood the substation from the wastewater pipes without getting inside the station? You said you knew every pipe belowground.”

Swanny thought for a full minute while Obi-Wan tried not to show his impatience. “There’s a small wash-up area in the substation for the workers,” he said finally. “If I divert the wastewater from tank 102C and gush it through system A-9 with enough force, it could conceivably break through a pipe joint—the pipes going into substation 32 are part of the old system, so they’re not in great shape—and then we’d have a pretty major

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

flood in a matter of minutes. It would take me more than an hour to get there and figure out what circuits I need to use.”

“You have forty minutes,” Obi-Wan said. “We’d better get started.”

Swanny had been right about the firepower. As Obi-Wan and Yaddle skirted the substation’s perimeter, he could see two grenade mortars guarding the entrance. The operators sat on repulsorlift platforms, and the Jedi could see that the targeting computers were engaged. Attack droids stood in ready formation.

“We could use a diversion,” Obi-Wan murmured to Yaddle as they hid behind a utility box.

“Accomplish this we must, if the Provisional Committee is going to be successful,” Yaddle said. “The longer it takes, the more things can go wrong.”

“Look,” Obi-Wan said, pointing at a stream of water underneath the double durasteel doors of the substation. “Swanny must have been effective. The flood has begun.”

Yaddle opened her comlink to signal the power grid team that Euraana had arranged to stand by.

Up on their repulsorlift platforms, the guards didn’t notice the water streaming out from underneath the crack in the durasteel doors. Their gazes continued to rest on the targeting computers that would show them attacking beings or airborne weapons.

“When it gets deep enough to endanger the equipment, the alarm should sound,” Obi-Wan murmured. “I’m betting the operators will leave their grenade mortars and let the droids guard the entrance. They’ll call for reinforcements.”

“One problem, there is,” Yaddle said. “Burst open, the doors might.”

“And that would release the flood into the tunnel,” Obi-Wan nodded. “In which case, the equipment might keep functioning.”

Jude Watson

He thought for a moment. "Can you use the Force to hold the doors?"

Yaddle nodded.

The water was now streaming down the tunnel and lapping at their boots. Because of the downward slope, it ran out from underneath the door. They could see that the water inside was rising, since the water was now leaking out of the seam between the double doors. The pressure of the water was causing the doors to vibrate from the strain.

Obi-Wan felt the Force surround them as Yaddle gathered it around her. The doors and the water stopped moving. It began to collect around the wheels of the grenade mortars and the legs of the droids.

They watched as the water deepened, held back by the Force. Soon it was lapping at the repulsorlift platforms, but the guards still did not notice, intent on their computers.

Suddenly a light flashed red over the doors. The alarm began to beep insistently. The two operators sat up in their chairs and swiveled to check behind them. They saw the water.

"What's going on?" one of them shouted.

The other spoke into a comlink. "They're sending reinforcements. Just stay calm."

"I am calm!" the second guard shouted. "I just can't swim!"

The other guard began to enter a code into a handheld sensor.

"They'd better boost the grid now," Obi-Wan said.

Yaddle listened intently to the comlink.

"Bypassed the station, they have," she told Obi-Wan. "Wait we must to see if the power surge will restore the grid..."

Suddenly the attack droids snapped into formation, splashing in the water.

"They must have engaged a life-form sensor sweep," Obi-Wan said.

"A few minutes more, they need."

"We just ran out of time." Obi-Wan activated his lightsaber. "Let's go."

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

He charged out into the tunnel, moving quickly through the water and heading straight for the mortar operators. They saw the Jedi charging and scrambled to jump back on their mortar platforms. Yaddle released her hold on the doors, which burst open, releasing a wave of water. Obi-Wan was prepared, but the power of the water almost knocked him down. He reached out a hand, using the Force to push one guard off his feet. His head hit the durasteel doors and he slumped to the floor as the water flowed down the tunnel.

Right behind Obi-Wan, Yaddle took out an attack droid with a flick of her lightsaber while she sent the other guard flying against the tunnel wall. The last guard took one look at the Jedi charging toward him with a lightsaber and took off, splashing down the tunnel.

Attack droids cannot be intimidated, however. The line wheeled toward the Jedi. Obi-Wan had never fought beside Yaddle before. She was all grace and flowing movement, her lightsaber a blur, the Force growing and charging the air around them until Obi-Wan could feel it humming in him and around him. Charged with Yaddle's energy, he sliced through four droids with one swift blow. The blaster fire was heavy but he had no problem deflecting it. It felt easy and natural with the Force so strong. Yaddle took out ten attack droids in what seemed like no time and then buried her lightsaber in the two grenade mortar controls. Within minutes, all of the droids were sizzling in the puddles of water.

"Reinforcements should be here soon," Obi-Wan said.

"Feel them near, I can," Yaddle said. She listened to the comlink and then nodded. "Success," she said to Obi-Wan. "Up, the power grid is, and in our hands. The city of Naatan is lit once more. Go now to the Mawans, I must. Time to return to their homes, it is."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I'll wait for the reinforcements. They'll most likely return to brief Striker."

Jude Watson

“As soon as I can return to help find Anakin I will,” Yaddle said.

Yaddle moved down the tunnel quickly, her robe swinging. Obi-Wan stepped back behind the utility box and waited. The tramp of running feet announced the arrival of the reinforcements.

They took one look at the spreading water, the still-sizzling droid parts, and the absence of the guards. The superior officer activated his comlink and spoke into it. Then he signaled to the others.

“Nothing we can do here,” the officer said.

“Aren’t you going to search the tunnels?” another one asked.

“Do I look crazy? Back to headquarters.”

They tramped off. After a moment, Obi-Wan emerged from behind the utility box and followed.

Chapter Eleven

He was grateful, at least, for the food. Anakin had considered rejecting the plate of vegetable turnovers with harima sauce, but what good would that do? He'd finished the plate and downed a carafe of water when suddenly Granta Omega strode out of his private room and the hideout exploded in movement.

He couldn't hear the orders Omega rapped out but suddenly everyone was busy. Computers were shut down. Bins were closed and locked. Weapons were gathered. Gravsleds appeared and gang members began loading them.

Obi-Wan, Anakin thought. He smiled.

Within minutes, the substation was cleared.

Still cuffed, Anakin was hustled into a speeder with the same Imbat guard. He zoomed down the tunnel at a fast clip. Anakin kept his mind focused so he could remember the many turns.

At last they arrived at their destination, a smaller space that had once been a refueling center. Anakin was tossed out of the speeder by the Imbat, but this time he was able to land on his feet. He watched while the gang members busily began to set up the hideout again. He could see that they had done this many times.

Granta Omega strode toward him, his boot heels clicking on the floor. He looked grim. "It's time to contact Yaddle."

Jude Watson

“As long as I can tell her who you are and I can speak freely.” He had nothing to lose by contacting Yaddle. He had complete confidence that she’d be able to handle Granta Omega. And Yaddle would be able to tell Obi-Wan that he was still alive.

Omega waved a hand. “Of course. I’m not trying to trick you, Anakin. I’m a businessman. I want to make a deal.”

“I’ll need my comlink.”

Omega tossed it to him.

“As long as I have it, I’d like to contact my Master, too,” Anakin said. It was worth a try.

“Do you think he’s worried about you?” Omega barked a laugh. “What you don’t know about your Master could fill your precious archives. Kenobi doesn’t have a heart. Beings are just a means to get what he needs to be—the great Jedi in his own mind.”

Anakin suddenly grasped a feeling that had floated in his mind, something he could not put words to. Now it formed into a belief.

“This is personal for you, isn’t it?” he accused Omega. “You hate Obi-Wan.”

Omega flushed. “No calls to your Master. I deal with Yaddle only. I only have so much hospitality to offer.”

Anakin contacted Yaddle. There was nothing else to do. He quickly explained that Striker was actually Granta Omega, and that he was his prisoner, which was hard to get out. He still felt ashamed that he had allowed himself to be captured.

“Omega has requested a meeting,” he finished. “He will only meet with you.”

“Hold you hostage, he did not need to do,” Yaddle said. “Talk to him, I would have done, if he had asked.”

“I guess he feels he needs some insurance that you will come alone,” Anakin said. “He’s afraid that if he sets up a meeting he will be betrayed.”

“I’m not afraid,” Omega hissed to Anakin. “Just careful.”

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

"I can't tell you where I am, because I'm not sure," Anakin said. "We just moved to a new hideout. And I don't know how sincere Omega is about making a deal. He says he is, but I don't trust him." Omega grinned at Anakin, not bothered in the least. "It is up to you to decide, Master Yaddle. All I ask is that you do not come because of me. I am fine here."

"So far," Omega said so that Yaddle could hear.

"Come, I will," Yaddle said. "But inform Obi-Wan first, I must."

"I have a list of coordinates," Omega said to Anakin. "I'll release them one at a time. If at any point it seems that Yaddle is not alone, I will disappear...with you."

"Understood," Yaddle said, after Anakin had conveyed this information.

Anakin clutched his comlink. He hoped they both had made the right decision. "May the Force be with you," he told Yaddle.

Omega rolled his eyes. "Oh, please," he said.

"Striker is Granta Omega?" Obi-Wan hissed into his comlink. He had concealed himself in the near-empty substation to watch the activity. The gang he had followed had come directly here, but it was obvious the main hideout had been moved. Now they were occupied in gathering up the last weapons and equipment and loading them onto speeders with cargo holds.

"Going to meet him, I am," Yaddle said.

"I'm coming with you."

"Best you do not," Yaddle said.

"He is my Padawan—"

"And trust me with his security you do not?"

Obi-Wan held the comlink away and sighed. He rested his head against the smooth surface of the tunnel wall. It was hard being matched up with an esteemed Jedi Master like Yaddle. He would not win any argument.

Jude Watson

“Moved his hideout, Omega has. It would take us too long to find it. A shortcut, this is.” Yaddle’s voice softened slightly. “Watch out for him, I will, Obi-Wan. But need you I do, to help with the Mawans. Agreed they have to go aboveground. The exodus is proceeding. A Jedi presence is needed here.”

Obi-Wan took a moment to accept this. It went against everything he wanted. He needed to see Anakin with his own eyes, to make sure he was safe and well. But Yaddle had told him that Anakin said he was fine, and his voice had sounded strong.

He needed to see Granta Omega, too. Anger rose in him, anger that made him want to put his fist through a wall. Anger he must learn to accept and release.

Omega had his Padawan. His most dangerous enemy had his most treasured companion. And instead of helping to release Anakin, Yaddle was asking him to shepherd complete strangers back to their homes.

It was that thought that helped him. He was a Jedi. The needs of strangers were most important. His own needs meant nothing in comparison to theirs. Obi-Wan repeated the words again in his mind, this time with the compassion and power that they warranted. He had to bring strangers safely to their homes.

“All right,” he said to Yaddle. “But tell Omega that I will see him soon.”

“A threat that is,” Yaddle said sternly. “And so deliver it I will not.”

Obi-Wan rested his head against the wall again.

“Unless I have to,” Yaddle concluded.

Anakin stood, waiting for Yaddle. Omega was using tracking droids to make sure Yaddle came to each coordinate alone.

They were in one of the airlift tube stations, smaller than the one Anakin had used to come below only hours ago, though it felt like days. He guessed he was about twenty levels down, near

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

the northeast quadrant of the tunnel system. If he had to find his way back to Obi-Wan, he might be able to.

"She's following my instructions," Omega said. "Smart."

"What did you expect?" Anakin said. "She's not afraid of you."

"Yes, I can always depend on Jedi arrogance," Omega said. "In an uncertain galaxy, it's so comforting to have one thing you can count on. Tell me, Anakin. Have you thought about what I said? I'll make the deal with Yaddle and we can go to Tatooine tonight. You could see your mother as early as tomorrow. I have a fast ship."

"I didn't need to think about what you said."

"Ah, but you did think about it, I can tell. This is your last chance. I hate to be dramatic, but..." Omega shrugged. "Choose."

"There is no choice," Anakin said.

"Too bad. Your loss. Mine too, that's the sad thing. Ah, the wee one approaches."

Yaddle came toward them, her robe swinging with the motion of her walk.

"Thank you for coming," Omega said courteously.

Yaddle studied Anakin for a moment. He saw her gaze rest on his stun cuffs, then move on. Her eyes met his, and he nodded to show her that he was all right.

"Understand I do that you have conditions, but willing you are to leave Mawan," Yaddle said.

"Willing? Hardly. I have a good thing here," Omega said.

"Choose to leave you may not, but warn you I must," Yaddle said. "Hunted you will be, by Senate security forces. By midday, under our control Naatan will be."

"Impressed with your speed I am," Omega said, mocking Yaddle.

Yaddle did not show anger or impatience, yet Anakin saw something flare in her eyes, something very much like defiance.

Jude Watson

“And wish he did for me to tell you, Obi-Wan will meet you soon.”

Omega laughed. “I’m sure he did. I wish I could say I’m looking forward to it, but Kenobi puts me to sleep.”

“Waiting to hear your conditions I am,” Yaddle said.

“Let me start by telling you that I am in possession of a highly illegal bioweapon.”

Anakin felt his stomach twist. He remembered the fingers tapping out information. B I O P O N—Bioweapon! He should have put that together! And the next letters he’d glimpsed had been T O X...

“It is a simple device, really,” Omega went on. “Beautifully simple. Basically a canister packed with a powerful explosive. But the canister is filled with dihexalon gas. Are you familiar with it?”

“Toxic to life-forms, it is,” Yaddle said. “Deadly.”

“Good, then you know what we are dealing with. The canister has been loaded into this airlift tube. The detonator is controlled by a remote device that is not on me, but I can transmit the order in seconds. I know you’ve been leading the Mawans back to their homes on the surface. That’s Obi-Wan’s job, isn’t it? Pity they all will die.”

“You targeted Obi-Wan?” Anakin asked, fury ticking beneath his words.

“No, your Master is just a bonus.” Omega eyed Yaddle. “You should know by now that I have bigger ambitions.”

Yaddle met his gaze. Anakin felt the Force stir. It seemed to rustle around his ankles, then move up his body, as if Yaddle was drawing it from the ground itself. He felt it like a physical sensation.

“Wish you do to kill a Council Member,” Yaddle said.

“I’m afraid so,” Omega said.

Anakin realized then that he was just a pawn in this struggle. Omega had used him. He had let himself be used. He had been so stupid!

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

“You must choose,” Omega said. “The lives of the Mawans—or the life of Anakin Skywalker, the Chosen One.”

“Or my own life,” Yaddle said. “So many lives, you play with.”

“That’s my job. Those cuffs on Anakin’s wrists are not stun cuffs,” Omega said. “They carry enough of a charge to kill him.”

Anakin looked down at the cuffs on his wrists. He had done this. He had been the bait to lure Yaddle here. Omega had lied. He still wanted to impress a Sith. And what better way than to kill a Jedi Council member?

“Your death will be painless, Master Yaddle,” Omega said. “I’ll give you that. I’m not interested in giving you pain. Anakin will bring the news back to Obi-Wan. It will soon be known around the galaxy.”

“And the bioweapon?” Yaddle asked.

“That’s my insurance that I will get off-planet,” Omega said. “With my soldiers, with my equipment, with my wealth, with my records. But The One Below will remain below. I will seal your legend, Master Yaddle.”

The One Below will remain below...

Omega would have revenge on Anakin as well. Anakin would have to live knowing he had caused Yaddle’s death.

“So what do you—” Omega started.

The movement was so sudden and so fast that even Anakin couldn’t track it. Yaddle’s lightsaber was activated without him seeing her move so much as a finger. She used it in a surgical strike at his wrists. He did not have time to flinch, which was lucky, because she could easily have cut off his hands. Anakin felt only a flash of heat, as though he’d touched something hot and then pulled his hand away.

The cuffs clattered to the floor.

The cuffs, falling...

That was in his vision, too! But the cuffs hadn’t been on Shmi. They had nothing to do with Shmi. Obi-Wan and Yoda had been right.

Jude Watson

“Launch it!” Omega screamed, then turned to Yaddle and added, “You have just ensured the deaths of thousands.”

Anakin realized in a flash that Omega must have had an open channel on his comlink. That had been an order. He heard the rush of air in the tube.

He only saw the flash of the hem of Yaddle’s robe as she Force-jumped toward the airlift tube. She pressed the maximum eject button with the hilt of her lightsaber as she passed. She burst into the airlift tube and shot upward like a blast from a laser cannon.

Omega was too stunned to move. Anakin didn’t hesitate. He jumped after Yaddle into the tube, pressing the maximum eject button as well.

The velocity was incredible. He shot upward to the surface so fast he lost his breath and his ears protested with a scream of pain. He shot out into a night sky that glittered with stars. The lights of the city were a blur as he passed them. He started to fall back down, the wind whistling past his ears. Only the Force saved him from an extremely bumpy landing. He called on it to slow his descent but still he landed hard, bending his knees and rolling with the impact.

He lay on his back, still dizzy, trying to catch his breath. Yaddle had not landed. He felt the Force so strongly it served to yank him to his feet. Again, it was like a physical presence to him, as though he could feel it on his skin and even in the roots of his hair.

Yaddle hung above him, above the tallest building of Naatan, the Force holding her temporarily aloft. She held a silver canister against her chest.

She was high above, but he heard her voice clearly. It was in his head, he realized.

If you lose your anger, find you it will. Embrace it and disappear it will. Chosen, you may be. But for what? Your question to answer, it is.

He barely registered her words. A terrible certainty was growing. And then everything was suddenly clear to Anakin, as

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

clear as the hard-edged stars. He realized what Yaddle was about to do.

“No!” he shouted. But he could already feel it. Yaddle was drawing in the great net of the Force she had created, drawing it around her so tightly and fiercely and strongly that Anakin fell to his knees. He had never felt the Force move like this. He couldn’t speak or move.

From far below, Granta detonated the explosives. Anakin heard a sharp pop, nothing more. The Force grew until Anakin was dazzled. Instead of exploding, the canister imploded, and Yaddle drew the toxic gas and the explosive power in, absorbing it into her body.

Then she simply disappeared. A shower of light particles swirled, hung in the air, then evaporated.

Anakin’s face was wet. Tears flowed and he did not feel them. The night sky was empty, and Jedi Master Yaddle was dead.

Chapter Twelve

Anakin sat, staring at the ground. He did not feel time passing. Somewhere in his mind he knew he should find a comlink, find a way to contact Obi-Wan, but the thought was distant and he did not pursue it.

Yaddle was dead. He knew it, but he couldn't grasp it. A member of the Jedi Council, a wise being so practiced in the Force that she was a legend. A being whose strength and wisdom the Jedi needed in these times. She had sacrificed herself for him. Because he had seen a thermal detonator too late. Because he had been captured. Because he had been tricked. A chain of events had brought him to this moment. At any time he could have changed his course. Instead he had blundered on.

She had saved him first, then gone after the bomb. Anakin puzzled over that. She had risked thousands of lives for his. Why?

Chosen, you may be. But for what? Your question to answer, it is.

Was that why she had saved him?

If that was the reason, he could not bear the responsibility. Her death was his fault.

A pair of dusty, muddy boots appeared. Obi-Wan crouched down.

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

“Something terrible has happened,” he said. “I felt the Force surge, and then retreat, like a vacuum. Tell me.”

“Master Yaddle is dead,” Anakin said, his voice muffled.

Obi-Wan breathed in, absorbing his shock. “How?”

Anakin told him the story in a neutral tone. If he added his feelings to the telling, he would not be able to finish.

Obi-Wan was silent for long moments. He sat back on his heels and looked up at the sky.

“She went below for me,” Anakin said. “She saved me first. If I hadn’t been captured...”

“Stop.” It was Obi-Wan’s sternest tone. “Jedi do not go down the path of ‘ifs.’ You know that, Anakin. You choose in each moment what your next step will be. You do not look back in judgment.”

Obi-Wan stood. “Yaddle made the only choice she could, and she made it freely.”

Obi-Wan reached down. Anakin’s lightsaber was in his hand.

“We will mourn her, but not now. Now it is time to be a Jedi.”

Anakin took the lightsaber. He rose and tucked it into his belt. His Master’s words should have made Anakin feel better, but they hadn’t. They had almost seemed automatic, as though Obi-Wan didn’t really mean them.

Even Obi-Wan thought Anakin was responsible for Yaddle’s death.

Sorrow and guilt filled him up so far he felt he was drowning.

And then there was an explosion of light and sorrow...He had lost, in fact, everyone he loved, including Obi-Wan.

The vision had been right.

Chapter Thirteen

Obi-Wan contacted Yoda on the emergency channel. He hated having to be the one to break the news. He would bring Yoda great pain. He felt the pain himself, in the way his body moved like lead. He had barely been able to summon up the right words to say to Anakin, and he knew his words had not reached him.

All he could think of was Yaddle. She had been part of his life from his earliest memory. She had taken special delight in the young Jedi students. She had turned a blind eye to their pranks. She had hidden sweets in their pockets. Her touch on the top of his head had felt like the most comforting thing in the world.

And then he had grown, and things at the Temple had become more serious. There were hard lessons to learn. Yaddle had been there, in a different way. There had been so many times when he had knocked respectfully on her door with a problem he did not want to trouble Yoda with. Obi-Wan realized how exceptional it was that a member of the Jedi Council had allowed herself to be so available to every student. Obi-Wan had not been the only one to seek her counsel, to look for comfort there.

He had lost something so precious. It had been a part of his life for so long he hadn't seen it clearly. Yaddle had just been

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

there, with her quiet wisdom. It was almost as bad as losing Yoda would be.

He gave Yoda the details quickly, knowing he would want to hear everything.

Yoda's voice was liquid with sorrow. "Felt the Force move, I did. Know I did that she was gone. Prepared my transport for Mawan, I already have. Her work, we must carry on. May the Force be with us."

They hadn't slept since Coruscant, but there was no time for sleep. With Yaddle's death, the fragile coalition she had formed threatened to fall apart. News of the bioweapon had spread, and the Mawans were close to panic. If Granta Omega had a weapon that devastating, who could say that he did not have another?

Within hours, the Senate went back on their pledge to send a security force and sent word that they would await further developments. They would not commit an army to an unstable situation.

Anakin dropped his head in his hands at this news. "Isn't the instability the point? That's why we need them!"

Obi-Wan sighed. "Yes, but if the security force is beaten by crimelords, the Senators are afraid it will look bad for them. Their image is more important than Mawan's security."

"What can we do?" Anakin asked.

"That's the simple part. Present them with an easy win," Obi-Wan answered. "The hard part is setting that up. Granta Omega has become our biggest problem."

"He would be happy to hear that," Anakin said.

They sat in a small office in the makeshift command center the Senate Provisional Committee had set up. Now that the power grid was functioning, they could monitor the streets through a system of security cams set up around the city. Many had been smashed, but some were still functioning, enough to give them a sense of what was going on. The streets were eerily

Jude Watson

quiet. Criminal activity had either retreated into buildings or gone underground. The sun was just rising, penetrating the gray with a blush of pink. Obi-Wan wished he felt as hopeful as the scene painted.

Euraana Fall entered, her face pale with fatigue and worry. “Feeana Tala is close to deserting the city and pulling her patrols. She doesn’t think we can hold the city against an attack by Omega.”

“That means the city will be left without security,” Anakin said.

“Which means everyone will retreat belowground again, and we’ll be back where we started,” Eurana said, lowering herself into a chair. She bent forward to lean her forehead against her clasped hands. She closed her eyes. “I’m hoarse from talking and reasoning. I don’t know what else to do. I’ve been in communication with the Senate representative. He refuses to reconsider the decision to pull back the Senate security force.”

“I will speak with him,” Obi-Wan said. “And I’ll handle Feeana as well. Let’s go, Anakin.” It seemed a great effort to haul himself out of his chair. Obi-Wan felt the fatigue deep in his bones. “We’ll grab some food on the way,” he said to Anakin, and saw the boy’s face brighten slightly.

They headed to the café on the second level. Once it had served the many Mawans who had flocked to the hall for music and lectures, and its extensive stoves and cooling units spoke of the array of foods that had once been offered. Now the shelves were bare. At least there was hot tea and a tray of muja muffins.

Anakin picked one up. “Stale,” he said, disappointed. “Why do the bad guys get all the good food?”

Obi-Wan held up his tea. “That’s what dunking is for. Another Jedi lesson for you.”

Anakin tried to smile. It was the first light moment they had exchanged since Yaddle’s death. But a moment later, Anakin’s face darkened again.

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

Something is very wrong, Obi-Wan thought. It wasn't just the aftermath of Yaddle's death. Why was it that whenever he needed to talk to his Padawan, circumstances got in the way? There was always a mission to complete, and then, these days, as soon as they were done, there was somewhere else important to go, another crucial battle to fight.

Across the empty tables Obi-Wan spied Feeana Tala, slumped over a mug of tea. This was a bit of luck. He could approach her informally. Sometimes that was better when you were trying to hold on to a deal. It would be easier to ensure the Senate's support if he could be sure Feeana would not fold.

Feeana looked as tired as Euraana had. She waved Obi-Wan off as he approached. "Go away."

Obi-Wan sat down, summoning up a cheerful smile. He motioned Anakin to do the same. He dunked a piece of muffin into his tea. "Good morning to you, too."

"Don't bother with the pleasantries," Feeana said. "I know why you're here. You're going to tell me that my cooperation is essential in holding the city. You're going to say that as a Mawan I owe it to my home planet. You're going to say that if I take my gang and retreat belowground that eventually I'll be imprisoned." She stirred her tea moodily. "I know all those things. But I've got my soldiers out on the streets, and there's not enough of them to hold the city against Striker—or Omega, as I hear his name is. What am I supposed to do? Send them to their deaths?"

"I would not ask you to continue patrolling the city if I thought that," Obi-Wan said. "I am not willing to sacrifice so many lives to get what we need."

"But Decca and Omega—"

"We can handle Decca and Omega."

She placed her spoon down carefully. "So you say. And yet a Jedi Master evaporated into dust particles just a few hours ago."

"Yaddle died in order to protect your soldiers and the people of Mawan," Obi-Wan said sharply. "That should tell you how far the Jedi are willing to go."

Jude Watson

There was a short silence. Feeana sipped her tea and made a face. "It's cold," she said. Then slowly, she nodded. "All right," she continued quietly. "I'll remain."

With Feeana's cooperation and the promise of Yoda's arrival, Obi-Wan was able to convince the Senate to aid Mawan. He found it difficult to keep his temper cool and speak reasonably. He wanted to shout at everyone that Yaddle had sacrificed herself for their peace and security, so the least they could do was follow through. He knew that grief was making him short-tempered. His heart was heavy, and he was angry, too, angry that Yaddle had to die.

These were emotions he could not carry with him, for they would drag him down. He had to absorb them and let them go. Yet he felt as though he was struggling against a rising tide.

Anakin said so little. He could not get up the energy to address his Padawan's need, either. And somewhere below, Granta Omega was biding his time, concocting his plan for revenge, and he would surely try to exploit Anakin's sadness for his own ends. Omega had already killed a member of the Jedi Council. That had been his great goal, and he had achieved it.

How could Obi-Wan get rid of his anger when he knew of Omega's satisfaction?

A silver streak in the sky told them that Yoda was arriving. They were on the lookout for it, and they hurried toward the landing site. The day had dawned gray and cold. A sudden dip in temperature had kept most beings inside. It was a lucky break. If Feeana's security patrols didn't have to worry about petty crime, it would be easier to keep them at their posts.

Yoda alighted from the cruiser. His gaze immediately went to Anakin.

"First, see it, I must."

Anakin nodded. He knew immediately what Master Yoda was asking. Yoda wanted to see the place where Yaddle had died.

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

For long moments, Yoda stood underneath the spot where Yaddle's life had ended. He leaned his head back as if to taste the air. He closed his eyes as if to feel the presence that still lingered. Obi-Wan imagined that he was saying a private, final good-bye to the friend he'd had for so long. He turned away, wanting to give Yoda the moment. Anakin's gaze rested on the ground.

At last Yoda turned. "Ready, I am," he said.

They headed back toward the command center. They found Swanny and Rorq waiting for them, sitting on the steps. They stood as the Jedi approached.

"Bad news," Swanny said. "Decca and Omega have settled their feud. They've formed an alliance."

"I was afraid of this," Obi-Wan said.

"It gets worse. Now Omega has access to Decca's fleet, and Decca has access to Omega's weapons. They are planning an assault on the city."

"We have no way to protect the city," Obi-Wan told Yoda. "All we have are security patrols."

"Then prevent the attack we must," Yoda said. "The strengths they have are transports and weaponry? Then strengths we must attack."

"I'm getting tired of saying that's impossible," Swanny said. "But this time, it really is. Decca just got a big shipment of fuel. It was part of the partnership deal—Omega supplied it. They just brought it below."

"A shipment of fuel," Obi-Wan murmured. "That might help us."

Swanny looked at him, incredulous. "I don't see how. But I have a feeling I will."

"Keep the information about the alliance quiet for now," Obi-Wan said. "If Feeana gets wind of this—"

"Uh, I think it might be too late," Rorq said. He pointed to the distance, where Feeana was striding toward them, an angry look on her face.

Jude Watson

“They have formed an alliance!” she exclaimed as she walked up.

“We know,” Obi-Wan said.

“And you are just standing here?” she demanded.

“A suggestion, you have for us?” Yoda asked mildly.

She noticed him for the first time. “Who’s this?”

“Jedi Master Yoda,” Obi-Wan said. “One of our most esteemed Masters.”

“Whatever,” Feeana said. “Maybe he can tell me what I should do when Omega and Decca attack my troops with transports and missile tubes?”

“Stop the attack before it starts, we will,” Yoda said.

“How?” Feeana demanded. “If you expect me to cooperate, I need more to go on.”

“Just trust us,” Obi-Wan said. “We need you to patrol all the airlift tube exits. As soon as we have control belowground, we will contact you.”

“I guess I have no choice,” Feeana said.

“Choice, you always have,” Yoda told her. “But the best one this is.”

A struggle still on her face, Feeana strode away.

“Well, I guess we’ll just say good-bye and good luck,” Swanny said, beginning to head off. Obi-Wan caught him by his collar.

“Not so fast,” he said. “You’re coming with us.”

Chapter Fourteen

Anakin was glad to go belowground. Being under the open sky where Yaddle had died had affected him. The sky had seemed to hang over him, pressing against his shoulder blades. Below in the tunnels, he felt safer.

Revenge was on his mind, and it frightened him. He hated Granta Omega, hated him with a burning rage that threatened to go out of control. He was grateful that Yoda had joined them. The presence of the great, perhaps the greatest, Jedi Master was as deep and huge as Anakin's rage. Surely it would keep his anger in check. He would look to his Master and Yoda for the control he needed.

He knew that Yoda and Obi-Wan also felt anger and grief. He saw it in their eyes, felt it in the air around them, noted it in the way they moved and spoke. Yet they were not deflected from their mission. He had watched in awe as they exchanged information. Their shared glances told him that they had both come up with the same plan, at the same time. Yoda was obviously grief-stricken, yet he had traveled here to finish a job that Yaddle had begun, and he would let nothing stand in his way, not even his own sorrow.

He had been so wrong, Anakin thought suddenly. On Andara, he had briefly imagined what it could be like to have no Master,

Jude Watson

no Council to answer to. But he needed the Council. He needed his Master. They showed him how far he had to go.

Their inner calm was something he desperately wanted. He would learn, he promised himself. On every mission he was brought up short and shown what he needed to concentrate on. But he would learn.

If I can get Obi-Wan's trust back.

Anakin felt as though he were drowning. Drowning in his guilt. Everything had changed for him now. Master Yaddle had died before his eyes, and it had marked him forever. He knew that as firmly as he knew his own name. As surely as he knew he would do anything now to be a Jedi Knight.

"Okay, here we are," Swanny said, standing in front of a map of the wastewater transport system. "What do you have in mind? Are you going to flood the fuel depot?"

"We'd never get away with that," Obi-Wan said. "Too many people around. I had something else in mind." He pointed to the map. "Here's Decca's fuel depot. Where are the fuel storage tanks?"

Rorq pointed to a spot several levels above. "Here. The fuel is pumped into a big storage tank here, then into the individual tanks in the depot."

Obi-Wan turned to Swanny. "Is there anyplace where the wastewater pipes come close to the fueling pipes between storage and the depot?"

"Sure," Swanny said. "The pipes run this way and cross the wastewater pipes here." He stabbed at a spot on the map.

"Where is that?" Obi-Wan asked. "Is it in Omega's or Decca's territory?"

"No, it's close to where the Mawan tent city was," Swanny said. He whistled. "I think I'm getting this."

"Is it possible?" Obi-Wan asked.

"We'd have to cut through the pipes and do some hydro-welding," Swanny said. "But that's like a walk in the park for us."

"It's almost too simple," Rorq marveled.

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

Yoda nodded. "The best plan, the simple one is," he said.

Anakin saw what Yoda and Obi-Wan had already figured out on the surface. Decca's fleet would fuel in the depot. But if they could replace the fuel with wastewater before it reached the depot, she would fill her transports with water instead of fuel. That would immobilize them completely. Even if they pumped out the tanks, it would take them days to dry out. Any water in the fuel would cause problems with the engines. It was beautifully simple.

"We'll need to know if they start refueling, though," Swanny said. "If we're working on the pipes at the same time, we could end up hip-deep in fuel."

"We'll keep an eye on the fueling depot," Obi-Wan said. "Anakin will be sure to protect you while you work." Obi-Wan spoke to Anakin. "As soon as Swanny and Rorq are done, join us at the fuel depot."

Anakin nodded. He was glad to have a task, even if it was only guarding Swanny and Rorq.

They split up. Anakin followed Swanny and Rorq through the tunnels toward the designated spot. Swanny stopped at a utility shed that had a serious locking device wrapped around the door.

"We need tools," Swanny said. "We'll have to break into this. It could take a while. If I had a fusioncutter I could break in, but the fusioncutter is in the shed."

"Not a problem," Anakin said. He activated his lightsaber and cut through the metal door in less than a second.

"I've got to stop underestimating you guys," Swanny said.

He and Rorq reached in and grabbed what they needed. Then they hurried on. They reached the designated spot and Swanny and Rorq began to work. Rorq opened a small door set into the tunnel wall. Behind it was a crawl space that was crisscrossed with pipes.

"You sure you know which is which?" Anakin asked.

"Do I ask you if you know your job?" Swanny asked.

"All the time."

Jude Watson

“Oh. True. Well, trust me.” With a grunt, Swanny closed the valve on a pipe, then began to cut through the metal with a macrofuser.

The minutes ticked by. Anakin shifted from one foot to another. His comlink signaled, and he answered it.

“Decca’s crew has arrived. They’re going to start fueling,” Obi-Wan said. “How close are they to finishing?”

Anakin asked Swanny, who held up three fingers.

“Three minutes.”

“Make it two,” Obi-Wan said.

“Almost,” Swanny said, fitting a short length of pipe between the two pipes they had been working on. “We just need to fuse”—he bent over with the macrofuser—“and seal...”

“Hurry,” Obi-Wan said. “They’ve released the hoses.”

“...one more second...”

“They’re starting...”

“Done!” Swanny exclaimed. He slumped against the pipe.

Rorq patted it. “Let’s hope this baby holds,” he said.

Anakin felt a drop of sweat trickle from his neck and down his back.

He heard the gush of liquid through the pipes. Swanny and Rorq kept their hands on the pipe, listening.

“That’ll be the wastewater,” Swanny whispered, as if Decca and her gang could hear. He patted the pipe. “The seal is holding.”

“Looks like it’s a go,” Anakin said into his comlink. “I’m on my way.”

Leaving Swanny and Rorq with the pipes, Anakin raced along the tunnels. He found Obi-Wan and Yoda hidden behind a speeder directly inside the entrance to the depot.

“They’ve almost finished fueling,” Obi-Wan said.

Anakin saw Decca lumber into the depot and speak to her pilots. The technicians ran back and forth, replacing the heavy hoses and making last-minute checks.

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

The pilots left Decca and hurried to their transports. The first pilot started up the engine. It coughed and died. The next fired his up. Another cough, a sputter, and the engine wound down. One after the other, the transport engines whined and sputtered out.

“What is happening?” Decca roared in Huttese.

“We’ve been sabotaged!” one of the pilots said. “Engine checklight says the fuel tanks have a foreign substance in them.”

“Granta has double-crossed me!” Decca bellowed.

“Ah,” Yoda murmured. “Suspicion among thieves, one can count on always.”

Decca turned to the Kamarian by her side. “Send the seeker droid. We’ll find that slimy monkey-lizard and take every weapon he has. We’ll crush him!”

“Time I think to take the speeder,” Yoda said.

Obi-Wan slipped into the pilot seat while Yoda hopped in behind and Anakin jumped in the passenger side. They kept their heads low. Obi-Wan started the engine and quietly zoomed out of the depot. He idled outside, and the seeker droid appeared a moment later. It darted down the tunnel like a fast-moving bird.

Obi-Wan gunned the motor, and they took off. It was easy to keep the seeker droid in their sights. Decca could not move very fast, but no doubt she was gathering her troops to follow the trail of the seeker wherever it ended up.

The seeker suddenly slowed, so Obi-Wan did the same. It hung in the air, which meant it was keeping its target in sight without alerting him to its presence. Obi-Wan glided to a stop, and they jumped out of the speeder.

They hurried along the few remaining meters. The tunnel curved ahead. Omega must be somewhere beyond the curve.

Walking slowly and cautiously now, they rounded the corner. They had come to a large landing area. The doors were slid back into the walls, revealing the large open space. Omega stood talking to a man dressed in heavy armor.

Jude Watson

Anakin saw rows upon rows of bins marked with their contents. Fléchette launchers. Flamethrowers. Missile tubes. There were enough weapons here to mount an invasion.

Which, of course, was the point.

“A troop of battle droids and some guards,” Obi-Wan murmured. “Nothing we can’t handle.”

“Prepared for this, he was not,” Yoda said.

The seeker buzzed closer. Suddenly, a shadow moved, and blaster fire erupted. The seeker exploded into shards of metal.

“Got it,” Feeana said. “Looks like we have company. Just as I told you.”

From behind Feeana, the battle droids appeared, rolling into attack formation. First one line, then another, and another. A grenade launcher rolled into place.

Omega smiled, and Anakin realized that he had known they were coming.

Feeana had betrayed them.

Chapter Fifteen

Obi-Wan saw at once they were hopelessly outnumbered. Behind the attack droids row after row of gang soldiers appeared, all of them armed with repeating blasters. They wouldn't lack for additional weaponry. It was piled up around them.

Behind his troops, Omega stood on a gravsled with Feeana. Omega's arms were crossed, as if in expectation of a staged battle for his pleasure, and a slight smile was on his face.

"Do we have a plan?" Anakin asked hopefully.

Yoda drew his lightsaber. "Time for strategy, it is not. Time for battle, it is."

Obi-Wan felt the Force move, a giant wave that propelled him forward into the room. He caught the flow and felt it charge his first move, a devastating sweep at five attack droids at once. He cut a swath through them all and they clattered to the floor, smoking.

Omega's smile slipped, just a fraction.

Yoda had moved forward with Obi-Wan and Anakin, but his style was less dramatic than Obi-Wan's sweeps and Anakin's whirling lightsaber. His arm barely seemed to move; his attacks seemed more flicks than stabs. Yet ten attack droids were on the floor in a heap of twisted metal.

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan saw the heavy durasteel containers suddenly move, floating up in the air, propelled by Yoda's use of the Force. As they hung above, the hinged lids opened, and flamethrowers spilled out in a fiery arc. Spewing fire, they rained down on the rest of the weapons. The blast of discharged explosives filled the air, smoke rose, and the remaining cache of weapons fused from the intense heat.

The line of gang soldiers stumbled back from the fiery spectacle, coughing from the acrid smoke. They wavered.

"Forward!" Omega screamed.

"Gladly," Obi-Wan said, and he charged forward, Anakin and Yoda at his side. Their lightsabers were hums of glowing energy. The Force moved, and droids went flying. The others were reduced to scrap. They mowed through the second line of droids, and then the next.

The soldiers stumbled backward. Some began to flee.

"Hold the line!" Omega shouted. Then he turned his back and leaped off the gravsled.

Obi-Wan saw Yoda lift his hand and send a trio of attack droids smashing against the wall. Even Anakin now was using a Force push to clear his path to attack the next line of droids. Obi-Wan had time to admire his Padawan's form, balance, and concentration. Clearly, Yoda's summoning of the Force had brought something out in Anakin. He was fighting more brilliantly than Obi-Wan had ever seen.

So Obi-Wan felt confident in leaving him with Yoda to finish off the droids. Omega was about to escape.

He gathered the Force and leaped, clearing the attack lines of droids and sailing over the retreating gang soldiers, who did not bother to try to stop him.

A hundred meters ahead, Feeana was facing what appeared to be a smooth tunnel wall made of a plastoid material. She pressed something at the side, and a recessed door slid open. Omega and Feeana disappeared inside. The door slid shut behind them.

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

Obi-Wan raced toward it. He did not bother to search for the release, but plunged his lightsaber into the plastoid wall. He cut a hole in seconds and pushed his way through.

He found himself in what was obviously meant one day to be a transit tunnel. It had been blasted out of rock, but the job had not been completed. Razor-sharp shards of rock jutted out from the sides of the tunnel.

A small, sleek silver cruiser was parked in a flat area ahead. Obi-Wan did not recognize the make, but it was clear to him that Omega would be able to fly aboveground and then blast out of Mawan airspace into the galaxy. He would escape again. He was seconds away from doing it. Even now, he was accessing the cockpit shell to climb in, Feeana at his heels.

Not this time.

“Always have a second exit plan,” Omega said as he stood inside the craft, the cockpit dome still raised. “My father taught me that.”

Something about the expression on Omega’s face stopped Obi-Wan from moving forward. Omega would sacrifice Feeana in order to escape. Obi-Wan knew it, Omega knew it. The only one who didn’t know it was Feeana. She was still on the hull of the ship, impatiently waiting for Omega to move so she could slide into the passenger seat.

Obi-Wan was also puzzled. In his investigation of Omega’s background, he had learned that Omega never knew his father.

“Surprised?” Omega said. He was almost drawling now, as if he had all the time in the world. “I had reasons to keep my father’s identity a secret. But I think it’s time I had the pleasure of telling you. I am the son of Xanatos of Telos.”

Xanatos! Obi-Wan felt as though he had been struck. The former Padawan of Qui-Gon’s who had turned to the dark side. Qui-Gon’s greatest enemy. Obi-Wan had seen the evil that Xanatos had done. Xanatos had even invaded the Temple and tried to kill Yoda.

Jude Watson

"You killed my father," Omega said. "He was greater than his Master, and Qui-Gon couldn't bear it, so he killed him—with your help."

"He killed himself," Obi-Wan said. "He jumped into a toxic pool on Telos rather than be captured by Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon tried to save him."

"My father would never have killed himself!" Omega shouted.

"You have spent your life constructing your own brand of truth," Obi-Wan said. "But it is not the real truth."

"Granta, let me in," Feeana said, an edge of pleading to her voice. "We have to get out of here!"

"My father protected me," Omega said. "He told me tales of the Jedi and the Temple and how they misunderstood the Force." A bitterness crept into his tone. "He had hoped that I would inherit his gift. But he knew when I was an infant that I would never be Force-sensitive."

Obi-Wan saw the opening. He saw the pain in Omega. "And he was disappointed," he said.

"He left me his company!" Omega burst out, as if he were bragging. As if his father had left him something better than love, better than approval. "He left me his fortune in Offworld."

Offworld was the corporation that Xanatos had formed, a mining operation that had used slaves and bribes and violence to build its wealth. Omega didn't create his wealth out of nothing. He had started with it.

Obi-Wan wanted to kick himself down the tunnel. He should have guessed! He should have known that beneath the jibes and insults there was something personal, something bitter, in the way Omega felt about him and the Jedi. He should have known!

He had the clues—why else would Sano Sauro pluck the promising boy away and send him to school? Sauro was hardly a benefactor to the poor. Sauro had known Xanatos well, had operated himself on Telos. And then there was the mystery of the boy's origins—why else were the mother and son on Nierport Seven, a moon that was basically a refueling stop? They

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

were hiding, of course. Xanatos had sent them there. And after he died, they didn't have the resources to leave.

Omega blamed Obi-Wan for his father's death. He was bitter that he did not inherit his father's gift. So he would chase the Force all over the galaxy. He would grow even wealthier than his father had been. He would prove to a man no longer living that he was worthy.

Now Obi-Wan even saw Xanatos in his son. The eyes with the metallic glint of blue durasteel. The thick black hair.

He had every clue, and he had missed it.

"You are just like your Master," Omega sneered. "My father told me about Qui-Gon, how he held him back. You do the same with Anakin. Control is what you seek, and you hide it behind Jedi lessons." He spat the word "Jedi" like a curse. "Why don't you let him be himself? Why don't you show him what power he can have?"

Obi-Wan didn't have to turn. The Force hummed in the tunnel, and he knew Anakin was behind him. Anakin had heard everything.

"It ends here, Omega," Obi-Wan said.

"It will never end until you are dead," Omega said. He reached out and grabbed Feeana's ankles. With a quick, powerful thrust, he threw her off the hull of the ship. Screaming, Feeana flew in midair, straight for the jagged, knife-edged rocks.

Anakin leaped. The Force added distance and precision. He caught Feeana in his arms just millimeters from the pointed shards, twisting in midair in order to land safely.

Obi-Wan, too, had leaped, trying to land on the cruiser hull. But he had to swerve to avoid Anakin, and Omega had already gunned the engine. He took off, the cockpit dome still unengaged. Obi-Wan landed badly and fell to one knee.

The cockpit dome slid down. The cruiser gained speed.

Omega had escaped again.

Chapter Sixteen

Anakin watched as his Master rose. A heaviness seemed to lie on Obi-Wan, a weariness Anakin had never seen before.

He kept a firm grip on Feeana, who was staring down the tunnel in shock, amazed that she had been left behind.

Anakin knew that all his questions were in his eyes. He had heard of Xanatos. Every Jedi student had heard the story of the Temple invasion. Obi-Wan had told him a little of it. Now Anakin realized how much more there was to know.

“We will discuss this later, Anakin,” Obi-Wan said. “We have a mission to complete.”

When they emerged back into the substation, the battle was over. Decca was just arriving with her troops. They were staring in disbelief at the litter of broken droids, fused weapons, captured forces, and only three Jedi.

Obi-Wan stepped over a pile of droids to speak to Yoda. “Omega has escaped. What should we do now with Decca?”

“A little reason now we shall use,” Yoda said. “A dead end, she has come to. Listen now, she will.”

He moved forward to talk to Decca.

“I thought you would lose,” Feeana said numbly to Anakin. “I was afraid for my troops. I had had some dealings with Granta.

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

He always said I could join him. He said he would protect me and my gang. I was such a fool.”

There was nothing to say, Anakin saw. He led Feeana to sit with the other prisoners and then returned to Obi-Wan.

“So your vision was true,” Obi-Wan said. “Yaddle met her death here. We just did not know how to interpret it.”

Anakin nodded. A lump rose in his throat. Why did having the vision make him feel so responsible?

“And yet it was not true, as well,” Obi-Wan said. “The vision was not about Shmi. It was about you. It was about the temptations in your life.” He hesitated. “What did Omega tell you?”

Anakin hesitated and then said, “That the Jedi were holding me back. That I could free the slaves on Tatooine, free my mother. He said he would help me do it.”

“That must have tempted you,” Obi-Wan said.

Anakin said nothing. He could not admit it, but he could not lie.

“It is all right, Anakin. It is understandable that you would want to ease your mother’s life. But being a Jedi means that your ties are to all beings. You are the only Jedi with such a strong, deep tie, and it makes it harder for you. But remember, a life of service is not only about giving up. It is about giving.”

“I don’t believe you’re holding me back,” Anakin said. “I hate him for saying it.”

“Hate is not an answer,” Obi-Wan said. “Understanding is.” He sighed. “Xanatos could twist feelings in just that way. He was a dangerous being. Just as Omega is. We’ll meet him again, I’m sure of it.”

Anakin was sure of it, too.

Yoda walked slowly back to them using his walking stick, his lightsaber tucked into his utility belt, his robe swinging. It was the Yoda Anakin knew best, the wise teacher, rather than the warrior. He was glad he had seen the warrior, however. He had

Jude Watson

seen how powerful Yoda was, and yet he knew somehow that he had seen only one small corner of his power.

“Leaving the planet, Decca is,” Yoda said.

“How did you manage that?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Informed her I did that the Jedi are thinking of setting up a satellite Temple on Mawan,” Yoda said. “Seemed to dismay her, it did.”

“We’re thinking of setting up a satellite Temple?” Obi-Wan asked, surprised.

“From time to time, discuss an outpost, the Council does,” Yoda said. “Merely suggesting it, I was. Enough it was to convince her that it was best to leave.” He blinked at Anakin. “See you do that the right diplomacy is always better than battles, young Padawan?”

Anakin nodded obediently, but something in his face must have alerted Yoda, for suddenly his gray-blue gaze grew keen. “Know you do that Yaddle’s death was not your fault,” he said.

“I had the vision,” Anakin burst out. “I should have known!”

“And Obi-Wan and myself?” Yoda asked sharply. “Told us of the vision you did, and yet know we did not. Blame us as well, do you?”

“Of course not,” Anakin said. “But things in the vision started to come true when I was with Omega. I should never have asked Yaddle to meet with him. I should have refused. I should have tried to escape.”

“When you look back, lose your place on the path, you do.” Yoda’s voice gentled. “Learn you will, Anakin, that stars move and stars fall, and nothing at all do they have to do with you.”

Yoda walked off with his Master. Anakin was grateful for his words.

Why hadn’t his Master said them? When he’d said that Yaddle’s death was his fault, Obi-Wan had remained silent.

He knew in his bones that he had caused a chain of events that led to a Jedi Master’s murder. Even if that didn’t make him

STAR WARS: The Shadow Trap

responsible, he knew it would make it hard for him to sleep at night.

The vision hadn't been wrong. The essential truth it had left him with was part of him now. He felt it inside him like a wound. It was loss. The gulf between him and Obi-Wan was wider than ever.

Book Seven
The Moment of Truth

STAR
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BY JUDE WATSON

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH



Chapter One

They hadn't spoken for many hours, not since they'd left the Core. Anakin Skywalker kept his eyes on the dashboard indicators, even though they were traveling in hyperspace and the ship was flying on the navcomputer. His Master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, pored over star charts on a datascreen. Every so often he would raise a chart in magnified holo-mode and walk through it, studying the planets more closely.

Anakin usually admired his Master's thoroughness, but today he felt irritated by it. Obi-Wan studied things. He made logical conclusions and plotted strategies. What did he know about leaps in intuition, dreams, risks, compulsions, knowing a step could mean disaster but taking it anyway? What did he know, Anakin thought bitterly, about guilt?

A Jedi Master was dead, and Anakin had seen her die. Master Yaddle had hung above him in a night crowded with stars, held by the Force. She had saved a population by absorbing the destructive power of a bomb with her own body. She had become one with the Force. The great light had sent him crashing to his knees. He'd thought he would never be able to get up again. And he'd known that as soon as he could feel again, as soon as he could think, he would feel responsible for her death.

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Before that mission he had experienced a vision that had haunted him. The only thing about it that had been clear was that it involved Master Yaddle. During the mission he had thought he understood what the vision meant. Yet he had kept going forward, kept pushing. He had thought he could change fate at any moment. And because he had thought those things, Yaddle had made a great sacrifice—a sacrifice *he* should have made—and she had died for it.

The Jedi had held a memorial service in the Great Hall of the Temple. Hundreds of Jedi had crowded the hall and the surrounding balconies and levels. The glowlights had been turned out abruptly. Tiny white lights were projected on the ceiling. Then, out of all the thousands of lights, one had gone out. Using the Force to direct them, each Jedi had turned and trained their eyes on that empty space. The memory of Yaddle had pulsed through the room. Anakin had felt the power of every mind and heart focused on one being. The absence of Yaddle grew until it filled the Great Hall.

And it is my fault she is gone.

The blank space had expanded in his mind until it had seemed enormous enough to swallow him. He could not turn away. He could not reveal his emotion to the Jedi who surrounded him. It took all of his discipline, all of his will, to remain with his eyes fixed on the spot. The grief had coiled around his chest like a great serpent, squeezing the air from his lungs.

He couldn't forgive himself for the mistakes he had made. He didn't know how to get to a place where he could forgive himself.

He still carried that feeling. He could not find a way to live with grief comfortably, as Obi-Wan could. Anakin remembered the days immediately following Qui-Gon's death. Anakin knew that Obi-Wan had been deeply affected by his Master's death, yet Obi-Wan had continued on the same steady path. How could he have felt so much, and yet not be changed?

He doesn't feel things as I do.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

Was that it? Anakin wondered. Did he feel too much to be a Jedi? He hadn't yet managed to achieve the distance from the Living Force that other Jedi could maintain. How could he learn to shut out his feelings, to close a door against them and keep on going?

Obi-Wan deactivated the maps he was studying and came to stand behind him.

"We are coming up on the Uziel system," Obi-Wan said. "We might run into Vanqor patrols when we come out of hyperspace." He leaned forward. The instrument panel cast a green glow on his frown.

"You look worried, Master," Anakin said.

Obi-Wan straightened. "Not worried. Cautious." He paused. "Well, maybe worried, too. I think the Council should have sent more than one Jedi team on this mission. It's a sign of how thin we are stretched."

Anakin nodded. It was a source of discussion among all the Jedi lately. Requests for peacekeeping missions were increasing, almost too many for the Jedi to handle.

"Our best chance for success is slipping through undetected," Obi-Wan said. "We'll have to rely on your talent for evasive flying."

"I'll do my best," Anakin said.

"You always do," Obi-Wan replied.

His Master's tone was light, but Anakin knew that he meant a great deal more than he'd said. It was one of several ways that his Master was trying to help him. Obi-Wan knew that Yaddle's death haunted Anakin. There had been a time, Anakin reflected, when Obi-Wan's kindness would have made everything better. Now he appreciated it, but it did not make a dent in his own guilt. Obi-Wan wanted to help him, but Anakin did not want his help. Anakin did not know why.

Focus on the mission. It will get you through.

He had been glad when Mace Windu had briefed them on this mission. He had wanted something difficult to lose himself in.

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The planet of Typha-Dor had pleaded for the Senate's help. They were the last holdout in the Uziel system against the aggressive invasions of the largest planet in the system, Vanqor.

An army of resistance fighters from the other planets in the system had found refuge on Typha-Dor and formed a coalition force to protect the last free planet. So far Typha-Dor had managed to hold out against Vanqor's colonization efforts. Yet they knew invasion was imminent.

One of the successful tools the Typha-Dor forces had used was a surveillance outpost on a remote moon. The outpost had been able to track the secret movements of the Vanqor fleet. Recently Typha-Dor had learned that Vanqor was targeting the surveillance outpost for attack. The outpost was in a remote area of the moon, hidden by heavy cloud cover. The land was packed with snow and ice for months, which also meant that it was almost impossible to get crews in and out.

Reliable information had come to the Typha-Dors that the Vanqors were close to pinpointing the location. It was imperative the news get through to the crew to abandon the post. There hadn't been word from the crew in several weeks, and the fear was that the comm units were down, or the worst had happened and the post had already been attacked. Anakin and Obi-Wan had been sent to discover what was going on and, if they were still there, to bring the crew back safely.

The ship eased out of hyperspace with barely a shudder. Instantly the surveillance equipment hummed to life.

"Nothing to worry about," Anakin said, setting his next course.

"Yet," Obi-Wan muttered.

Anakin plotted a course that would keep him well away from space lanes. They traveled in watchful silence. The Typha-Dor moon, so obscure it hadn't been named, loomed. It was known by its coordinates—TY44. Anakin saw it on the radar and then received a visual sighting. He could not see the moon itself, only

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

the atmosphere around it. The clouds offered no glimpse of the satellite's surface.

"There it is."

"Radar sighting," Obi-Wan said suddenly. "Looks like a large gunship."

Without slowing his speed, Anakin reversed and dived. If they could get out of radar range, they might not get spotted. The Galan starfighter was small enough that it could be mistaken for space debris until the ship got closer.

"Hasn't noticed us," Obi-Wan said. "I think we dodged this one."

Anakin maintained speed, flying slightly erratically to mimic space debris.

The gunship suddenly changed course.

"He's got us," Obi-Wan said crisply. "Six quad laser cannons, three on each side. Two concussion missile launch tubes. Four...no, six turbolaser cannons."

"In other words, we're a little outgunned," Anakin said.

"I suggest evasion as our best course," Obi-Wan agreed dryly.

Laser cannonfire exploded around them.

"Missile on the left!" Obi-Wan shouted.

"I see it!" Anakin streamed up, making a sharp turn to evade the tracking device. The missile hugged their path. At the last second, Anakin veered off, and the missile passed them by a few meters.

"Close," Obi-Wan said. "They're speeding up. We can't outrun them, Anakin."

"Just give me a chance."

"Too risky. Just get us down. We'll land on the Typha-Dor moon."

"But we're far from the outpost," Anakin said.

"We stand a better chance down there." Another missile screamed past. The small ship was tossed by the reverberations of cannonfire. "They'll send a landing ship, but we'll have a head start."

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The explosion was close. Anakin gripped the controls and gritted his teeth. His choice would be to keep flying, but he had to obey his Master.

He felt the response of the ship as he changed course. It shuddered, as though it had sustained damage. He glanced at the indicator lights. Nothing blinked at him. There must be superficial damage on the wing. Not a problem for an experienced pilot.

Anakin dipped the ship and dived into the heavy cloud cover below.

Chapter Two

Obi-Wan glanced down at the surface as they dipped lower. He squinted against the glare. The thick clouds didn't diminish the effect. The ground was covered in snow and glaciers, and the light bounced and refracted, making it difficult to see. Anakin skimmed over the terrain, looking for a place to land.

"We'll need to engage the sensors," Anakin said. "No telling how deep that snow is."

Obi-Wan had already turned to the starship sensor array. "I'm getting a solid reading. The ice is meters thick. It will hold the ship." Obi-Wan read out the coordinates. "By the lip of that rock outcropping there. We're far enough away that we won't lead them to the outpost, but it will be a bit of a walk."

Anakin guided the ship to a smooth landing. The cockpit hatch slid back. At first, the silence was overwhelming. The cold settled into the cockpit slowly. At first, Obi-Wan felt it on the tips of his ears. Then his fingers. Then the back of his neck. Soon every millimeter of exposed skin felt numb.

"Cold," Anakin said.

"That's an understatement," Obi-Wan said, vaulting over the seat toward the supply locker. He grabbed the survival gear and tossed a set to Anakin. Then he pulled out a white tarp. "If we

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secure this over the ship we might gain some time,” he said. “At least they’ll find it hard to get a visual sighting.”

After donning survival gear and goggles, they spent a few minutes securing the tarp over the ship and strapping it down.

Anakin glanced at the sky. “How long do you think we have?”

“Depends on how good they are at tracking,” Obi-Wan said. “And how lucky we are. However much time we have, it has to be enough.”

They started out across the frozen landscape. Ice had formed in a thin layer on the ground, making walking treacherous. In their thick-soled boots, the Jedi had traction, but it took concentration to move quickly without sliding over the ice. Obi-Wan felt his leg muscles tense, and he knew they would be tired at the end of this journey. He only hoped that what lay at the end of it was a short rest, at least. There was no telling what they would find at the outpost.

After a few minutes Obi-Wan grew used to the rhythm of their journey and the eerie sound of the wind ruffling the snow on top of the ice, creating a low whistle that dipped in and out of hearing. His mind slipped out of its focus on the mission. He brooded, as he often did these days, on the tall, silent boy at his side.

When he had been Anakin’s age, sixteen, the thought of the death of a Jedi Master had been inconceivable. He had been in tight spots with Qui-Gon—his Master had even been captured by a deranged scientist named Jenna Zan Arbor, who had imprisoned him in order to study the Force—but it had never occurred to him that Qui-Gon could be killed. He had assumed that a being so strong in the Force could cheat death.

Now he knew better. He had seen Jedi Masters fall. He still remembered the horror he felt as he saw the life drain from Qui-Gon’s eyes on Naboo. Recently the Jedi Order had lost another Master, Yarael Poof.

The galaxy was a rougher, harder place. Lawlessness was growing. Obi-Wan knew now that the Jedi were far from

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

invincible. That knowledge had made him more careful, perhaps a bit less willing to risk too much. Which could be good, and bad, depending. As he settled into his life as a Jedi Master, Obi-Wan was very aware that his need to control situations, to look at all sides of an issue, would conflict with the desires of his headstrong apprentice. He saw conflict ahead but he also saw himself unable to stop his movement toward it.

Anakin was powerful. Anakin was young. These two facts could collide with the power and heat of a fusion furnace.

Obi-Wan had gone over and over in his mind what had happened with Master Yaddle. He could not see any way that he could have prevented it.

His Padawan had relied on his command of the Force and on his absolute conviction that he was taking the only possible path, and events had overtaken him. Obi-Wan had no doubt that Yaddle had seen her own death coming. She had decided it was necessary that she become one with the Force. She had done it to save countless lives, and she must have seen that Anakin's path was mapped out otherwise.

Obi-Wan didn't know how much Anakin blamed himself, but he knew that his apprentice was brooding over what had gone wrong. It was appropriate that he do so, but not appropriate for him to blame himself.

Yet how can I stop him from doing so, if I blame him myself?

Blame was not something a Jedi was supposed to feel. Obi-Wan knew he was wrong. He tried to look at what had happened in a measured way, but he kept circling back to the fact that in his heart, he believed that Anakin could have somehow prevented Yaddle's death.

He told himself that if Anakin had made mistakes, they came from a place that was pure. It was not in the Jedi code to second-guess another Jedi's decisions. But Obi-Wan knew his words of comfort had a hollow core, and he suspected that Anakin knew it, too.

Jude Watson

The distance between them continued to grow. Yaddle's death had changed them both.

No, Obi-Wan corrected himself. The distance had been growing before that. Perhaps it has always been there. Perhaps I didn't want to see it.

Anakin's pure connection to the Force meant that in some ways Obi-Wan had little to teach him. At least it seemed that Anakin was beginning to think that. Yet Obi-Wan knew he still had so much to give him. Being a Jedi involved more than commanding the Force—it involved the inner serenity needed to access that Force in the best way. Yaddle's death had shaken Obi-Wan to the core. Was it possible that Anakin had too much power?

Obi-Wan would not give up on Anakin. It was his duty as a Master to teach his apprentice, to help him become a Jedi Knight. All he knew was that he never seemed to have time to address the problem of the tension between them. Every day was packed with things to do, with travel, with missions or Council meetings. The galaxy teemed with trouble. The Senate was sometimes mired in procedures. The problems of an apprentice and his Master got lost in the chaos that surrounded them.

Obi-Wan was all too aware that guilt and shame could percolate and turn into anger, and he was alert for the signs of it. So far, Anakin just seemed remote. This, he had to remind himself, was normal for a young man of sixteen.

That is what you keep telling yourself. But is it true?

His mind had circled around to the beginning. Obi-Wan let out a puff of exasperation, which he hoped Anakin did not hear. He concentrated on his steps through the icy snow.

The kilometers passed in silence. The outpost was tucked into a mountain range that rose from the glaciers. Obi-Wan thought he could make out its outline in the distance with the electrobinoculars, but it was hard to be sure. Land and sky merged in a sea of white. The clouds seemed to lower as they walked, and a few flakes separated from the thick blanket above

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

them and drifted lazily down. Soon the flakes thickened and the wind freshened, driving the snow against their faces.

Obi-Wan looked at the horizon. A silvery clump of snow seemed to be falling fast against the white sky. But he wasn't seeing snowflakes. It was a cruiser.

"Surveillance," he said crisply to Anakin. "Drop down."

It was the only thing to do. There was no cover. They dropped to the ground, their faces in the snow. From above, their white survival gear would blend with the landscape. They heard the *whirr* of the engines above and stayed perfectly still. The ship was going slowly, tacking over the area in a sweep. Obi-Wan slowed down his breathing and his life processes, a Jedi technique. He knew Anakin would do the same. It would make it difficult for a life-form sensor to pick up their traces. The cold would help them, too.

Obi-Wan didn't think of the cold, or the imminent danger. He let his mind slow as his body processes had. He made himself a blank, just another piece of white against a white background.

The *whirr* of the engines softened and waned. They waited until they could hear nothing, concentrating so hard that Obi-Wan heard the tiny *plink plink* of the icy snowflakes hitting the ground beside him.

Anakin rolled over. Ice had caked in his hair. He blinked the snow off his eyelashes. "I feel like a frozen jujasickle."

"You look like one, too. But it's better than being shot at."

"If you say so." Anakin stood and dusted the snow off his legs.

"They'll be back. We'd better hurry." Obi-Wan consulted the map on his datapad. "We're close. We have to be careful now. We don't want to lead the Vanqors to the outpost."

"Let's hope they don't find the—"

A loud explosion suddenly sounded. Obi-Wan and Anakin turned back the way they had come. Obi-Wan put the electrobinoculars to his eyes. He saw a thin plume of smoke.

"They blew up our ship," he said.

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They didn't need to say out loud what they were thinking. If the ship at the outpost wasn't operable, they could be stuck on the moon for some time. If the outpost was destroyed, they would have no shelter.

They found the strength to move faster. There wasn't much daylight left, and traveling in the darkness would be difficult. At least moving faster kept them warmer. The snow continued to fall and then turned into a blizzard. The falling temperature transformed the flakes into icy pellets that stung their cheeks. Despite his discomfort, Obi-Wan was grateful for the storm. It would hamper the search effort by the Vanqors.

"The shortest route will be over the glaciers," he yelled over the noise of the storm to Anakin. "It's also the hardest."

"Let's do it," Anakin shouted back. They both knew that the sooner they found shelter, the safer they would be.

The glaciers loomed ahead, tall blocks of ice hundreds of meters thick, some rising up to create mountains of ice. They began to climb upward, using their cable launchers to haul themselves directly up the sheer face of the ice. Despite their thermal gloves, their fingers felt frozen. It was hard to grab the cable and find purchase on the ice. Obi-Wan saw the effort and strain on his Padawan's face, and he felt it in his own body as he pushed forward, every meter a battle now.

After several hours of hard climbing, they were close to the coordinates of the outpost. The climbing was more gradual now, and they were able to move faster. The darkness grew around them.

Obi-Wan checked the coordinates. "The outpost should be right here."

He squinted ahead in the now-gloomy light. He saw nothing, just the same blank whiteness that they'd been traveling in since they'd started. Had his eyesight been affected? He checked the coordinates again.

"I know where it is," Anakin said suddenly, striding forward.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

Obi-Wan followed him. He relied on coordinates. Anakin relied on his perceptions. He couldn't see it, but he could feel it.

Ahead, what at first appeared to be a sheer ice cliff was really the wall of the outpost. Obi-Wan could now see that ice had completely covered the structure, which was made of a thick white material able to withstand extreme cold without cracking.

There seemed to be no entry, and no way to alert anyone inside that they were there. Anakin pounded on the wall. There was no response.

Now that they were standing still, the wind and cold cut into them, insinuating cold fingers inside their clothes. Obi-Wan wondered if they would have to set up camp and try again in the morning.

Just then the ice began to groan. A door slowly eased open, pushing against the ice that caked it. It stopped halfway.

A slender human woman stood, her hands on a blaster pointed at them.

"We are Jedi, sent by Typha-Dor," Obi-Wan said. "You must be Shalini."

He had studied the text docs of the crew during the journey from the Temple. Shalini was the crew leader. Her husband, Mezdec, was the communications officer.

Slowly, the blaster lowered. Shalini's silvery eyes sent them a sharp glance. "So our leaders have remembered we exist."

"They could not reach you. Your comm unit is down."

"I'm aware of that. It's been down for over a month. Glad they decided to check on us." She stood aside. "Come in."

Obi-Wan ducked his head to get through the doorway. They stood at the entrance to a small room. The lights were at half power. A weapons rack stood to one side. On the other was a console with surveillance and data equipment. Another console was near the doorway. Obi-Wan noted that it was damaged, with scorch marks indicating close blaster fire. Positioned around the room were four other crew members, all with blasters pointed at the doorway.

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"It's all right," Shalini said. "They've been sent by Typha-Dor." She tucked her blaster into her belt.

One man leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. He looked weak and pale. "About time."

A tall, muscular woman slipped her blaster into a shoulder holster. "Past time."

The welcome wasn't quite the friendly one Obi-Wan had imagined. Then a tall man in a thick pullover strode forward. "Don't mind us. It's been a long haul. We're very glad to see you."

"This is Mezdec," Shalini said. "He's our first officer. I am Shalini, the leader of the group. The others are Thik"—the weak-looking man nodded at them—"Rajana, and Olanz." The muscular woman nodded curtly at them, and the other man, bald and as tall as Mezdec, raised a hand in greeting.

"But where are the rest?" Obi-Wan asked. "There are supposed to be ten of you."

"Not anymore," Shalini said. "We had a saboteur in our midst. Samdew was the communications officer. We discovered that he was a spy for the Vanqors. He destroyed our comm system right after we were able to intercept the Vanqor invasion plans."

"He also disabled our transport," Mezdec said. "So we've been stuck here. We're almost out of food, so we're especially glad to see you."

"In that case, let's begin with a meal." Obi-Wan reached for his survival pack. "We brought extra rations in case."

He and Anakin doled out the protein packs. The group sat down and split up the food. While they ate, Obi-Wan scanned the equipment. He took a second look at the damaged comm control console. "What happened?"

"It was the middle of the night," Mezdec said. He swallowed and pushed the rest of his food away. "I was awake, and I heard Samdew at the comm unit. I thought he was doing a sweep—we monitored the channels constantly, and I assumed he was

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

checking to see if anything turned up. I was awake anyway, so I got up to see if anything was happening.”

“There was quite a bit of chatter on the system,” Shalini said. “The Vanqors knew we had been able to monitor their comm channels. In order to confuse us, they’d flood us with information. That made Samdew a crucial member of our team. He was our senior information analyst.”

“I stood in the doorway. He didn’t hear me,” Mezdec said, his eyes clouding at the memory. “And I saw that he wasn’t monitoring transmissions. He was transmitting *to* the Vanqor fleet. I realized he was a spy. I blasted the console. I didn’t know what else to do. It was the fastest way to stop him. I didn’t want to kill him. But he turned and moved toward me, and the next shot hit him in the chest.”

“It’s all right, Mezdec,” Shalini said quietly. She put her hand on his arm.

“I heard the blaster fire,” Rajana said, taking up the account, as Mezdec had fallen silent. “I heard Samdew fall, and I ran in. While he was on the ground, he tried to shoot Mezdec just as Thik came in after me. Thik was hit in the knee and went down.” Rajana looked at Mezdec. “I was the one who fired the fatal blast. Not you.”

“Samdew died,” Shalini said. “What we didn’t know was that before he died, he activated the fire system in the sleeping quarters. The room goes into lockdown, and all the oxygen is sucked out.”

“He had disabled the warning siren, but not the procedure. Four of our crew were in there,” Mezdec said. “They suffocated. By the time we realized what had happened, they were dead.”

“He meant for all of you to be in there,” Anakin said.

“Yes,” Shalini said. “We imagine that he was sending his last transmission. He didn’t need to be undercover anymore, and the easiest thing to do was get rid of us.”

“If the Vanqors know your location, why haven’t they attacked?” Obi-Wan asked.

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Shalini shook her head. “We don’t think they do. We think Samdew was in deep cover. He never sent a transmission before that night, and Mezdec stopped him before the transmission went through. All transmissions were coded and timed, so we would have known if he’d been in contact with the Vanqors. We assume that his mission was to remain until we had cracked the Vanqor code and learned something vital.”

“Which we did,” Rajana said.

“Yes, let’s get back to that,” Obi-Wan said. “What have you learned?”

“We have the details of the Vanqor invasion plans,” Shalini said. “Troop movements, coordinates, the invasion sites. We have it all on this.” Shalini held up a small disk. “It’s crucial that we get the information to Typha-Dor.”

“We’ll have to leave from here,” Obi-Wan told her. “We have good reason to believe that the Vanqors have destroyed our ship. I’m afraid it’s only a matter of time before they find this outpost.”

“Samdew sabotaged the transport,” Mezdec reminded them. “I can fix anything, but I can’t fix it.”

Anakin stood. “Let me try.”

Chapter Three

Anakin disappeared into the transport hangar. Obi-Wan had no doubt that if anyone could fix the vehicle, it would be Anakin. He had a genius for fixing the unfixable.

Shalini looked worried. “Mezdec has tried for weeks to fix the ship. With all possible respect for your apprentice, he’ll never be able to get it up and running. Are you certain nothing can be salvaged from your transport? Maybe we should chance a walk there. We don’t know for sure that Vanqor has set an ambush. There might be parts we could use. I’ll go, if you can give me the coordinates.”

“Shalini, no,” Mezdec protested. “It’s too dangerous.”

“No, it’s not,” Shalini said. “It’s necessary.”

“You’d never make it at night,” Mezdec argued. “Survival gear can’t protect you from that kind of cold. Besides, you know the rule. We only go in pairs.” He touched her hand. “As you and I do,” he said in a gentle tone.

She smiled, but shook her head. “We should try every avenue. I am responsible for this disk.” She touched her belt, where she had tucked the disk into a hidden slit. “I have another idea. We could return to the Jedi ship, expecting an ambush. A few of us could pretend to surrender. Then the others could attack the Vanqor ship. We could get off-planet in their transport.”

Jude Watson

“That’s a highly unlikely scenario,” Obi-Wan said. “And a last resort. Let’s give Anakin a chance before we make that decision.”

Everyone ignored Obi-Wan. “Maybe we should split the team,” Olanz said. “A few of us could go with Shalini at first light. We could take the missile tube and some flechette launchers.”

“Our strength is in our numbers,” Rajana argued. “We should remain together.”

“Thik can’t travel,” Mezdec pointed out.

“I can travel,” Thik said. “Just not very fast.”

“And what of the ones who remain behind?” Rajana asked. “We’re almost out of heating fuel. Whoever stayed would be facing death.”

“We have faced death all along,” Thik said.

“That doesn’t mean we should invite it in,” Mezdec said.

Thik smiled slightly. “Isn’t this just like our homeworld. We spend so long arguing about what’s the best way to do something that we never get anything done.”

“That doesn’t mean we should be invaded,” Rajana said sharply.

Shalini turned to Obi-Wan. “We’ve been cooped up together for too long,” she said. She gave a tense smile. “When we haven’t been trying to find a way to get off this moon, we’ve been arguing about the best way to do it. Thik has a point.”

“Typha-Dor is lucky,” Thik said. “We are rich in resources. We have abundant sunshine and water. Our world is large and varied. We have a large workforce. Yet we have never learned how to truly manage our resources and turn them into the wealth we need.”

“Yes, yes,” Rajana said impatiently. “And Vanqor is a small, dusty planet. Yet they have learned how to get the most out of what they have. Their industries are booming. They are wealthier than us, despite their small size. That does not mean they deserve to conquer our star system!”

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

"I am not defending Vanqor's aggression," Thik said. "You know that, Rajana. Why am I here, if not to sacrifice my life if I must for my homeworld? I am just saying that even Vanqor could have lessons to teach us."

"The Vanqors are greedy and ruthless," Mezdec said darkly. "If they have something to teach us, I have no desire to learn it."

"It is that attitude that sets us up for conflict in the first place," Thik said. "If we had been more willing to negotiate years ago, we would not be facing invasion now."

Mezdec stood. "I am beginning to wonder who the traitor is here!" he bellowed.

Shalini put her hand on her husband's arm. "Sit," she said softly.

After a moment's deliberation, Mezdec sat down.

"Would anyone like another protein bar?" Obi-Wan tried. Everyone ignored him again.

The tension was thick in the room. It was no wonder, Obi-Wan thought. They had been together for over a year. They had been hunted by the Vanqors. There had been a saboteur in their midst. They were afraid they would never make it off-planet.

He understood their testiness, but he wasn't too excited about having to listen to it.

"I think I'll check on Anakin," he said.

The hangar was located in the back, past the utility rooms. There was only one transport and a few speeder bikes that had been dismantled for parts. All Obi-Wan could see were Anakin's legs, sticking out from underneath the transport. Obi-Wan leaned down.

"Any luck?"

Anakin's voice was muffled. "Maybe. But what I wouldn't give for a pit droid."

"Consider me a pit droid," Obi-Wan said. "What can I do?"

Anakin slid out. "You need some servodrivers for hands and a grease pump instead of a nose." He said the words grumpily.

Jude Watson

“Well, let me do something,” Obi-Wan said. “Have you pinpointed the problem?”

“Sure,” Anakin said. “That’s the easy part. It’s the power generator. The transfer wires from the sublight engine are fused together, which means that the fusion system is completely blown.”

“Can you replace the transfer wires?”

“Sure. But then the backup from the power feeds would trigger a response.”

“And that response would be...”

“The ship would blow up.”

“Not optimum,” Obi-Wan said.

“I can see where Mezdec tried to improvise. But he keeps running into the same problem.” Anakin tapped his finger on the shell of the ship. “Here’s what I can’t figure,” he said. “Why would Samdew disable the ship completely? If he killed all the crew here, how would he get off-planet?”

“Maybe he didn’t need the ship,” Obi-Wan said. “The Vangors would pick him up.”

“Okay,” Anakin said. “But if I were a spy stuck on a remote moon, I’d want a back door, just in case. I wouldn’t assume that everything would go as planned.”

“Things rarely do.” Obi-Wan nodded thoughtfully. “Meaning there must be a way to fix the ship.”

“I just don’t know what it is yet.” Anakin ducked back under the ship. “But I’ll find it. Hand me that fuse-cutter, will you?”

Obi-Wan reached for the tool. For the next hour, he silently helped Anakin try one route, then another, to fix the ship. He admired Anakin’s focus. It was as though the engine were an ailing organism that he was coaxing back to life.

Mezdec wandered out to help, and he and Anakin conferred. Obi-Wan lost the thread of the conversation, which skimmed over fuse switches, overrides, and surges. He knew something about engines, but not nearly as much as Anakin.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

At last Anakin replaced the engine plate, entered the ship, and eased into the pilot seat. He hesitated before firing the engines.

"You might want to back up," he told Obi-Wan, who had also entered the ship.

"How far?"

"To the next star system." Anakin grinned. "Only kidding." He engaged the throttle and the engine roared to life.

Mezdec yelled from the outside, "The kid knows his stuff."

"That he does," Obi-Wan agreed as he exited.

Anakin powered down the engines and leaped out of the ship. "I can get it started, but I can't restore full power. That means no deflector shields. We had to bypass the weapons delivery system to juice up the generator, so we won't have turbolasers, either. In other words, we'll have a slow ride, and we'll be exposed if the Vanqors track us on radar. And then there's the fuel problem."

"Which is?"

"We don't have much. I ran our options through the computer. The only way to get to Typha-Dor is by the shortest route. That's going to bring us right into Vanqor airspace."

Obi-Wan grimaced. "This just keeps getting better." He looked back at the shelter, where the four crew members waited. "We'll have to risk it. Our only chance is to slip through their surveillance. Space is big."

"Space is big?" A flash of humor made Anakin's eyes sparkle. "That's your strategy? I guess I can stop worrying."

The mischief in Anakin's eyes suddenly lightened Obi-Wan's heart. He saw the flash of a boy he'd once known, a boy who liked to fix things, a boy who had yet to understand the great gifts he had been given. A boy untroubled by those gifts who believed the galaxy would unfold for him, show him the promise of his dreams.

I can't let him lose that spirit. I can't let him lose the boy he was.

He grinned back. "Thanks," he said. "I just thought of it."

As they exchanged smiles, something changed. Something lightened, and the tension between them eased, just a bit.

Jude Watson

But then, just as the moment passed, Obi-Wan saw sadness in Anakin's eyes. He caught the same feeling. It was no longer possible to fix things between them with a joke, a light moment. Things ran too deep for that now.

"I'll get the others," Obi-Wan said.

Shalini stood, her hands on her hips, surveying the main room.

"I sure hope you can make that thing take off," she said.

There was nothing left of the shelter. It was now an empty shell. The team's instructions were to destroy anything that could be of use to the Vanqors. Shalini and the rest had used soldering equipment and tools to fuse and destroy the comm and surveillance suites. They had destroyed all their files and everything they could not carry aboard ship.

Anakin sat behind the controls, with Mezdec next to him. "The takeoff could be bumpy," he told the others. "We don't have enough power for a smooth ride. Once we get into the upper atmosphere we should be okay."

Anakin started the engines. The retractable roof of the hangar slid back. Watching the instruments carefully, Anakin gave the engines power and they rose, too slowly for Obi-Wan's comfort. The ship shook with the effort.

Anakin's face was completely calm, but Obi-Wan noted the sheen of perspiration on his skin. The controls shook in his hands. The shuddering ship rose over the icy wasteland. It slid sideways, dangerously close to the side of the mountain. Obi-Wan saw Thik close his eyes. Shalini touched her belt, where the disk lay hidden.

Anakin gave another boost to the power, and the ship shot up into the upper atmosphere. "That was the hard part," he announced to the others. "Next stop, Typha-Dor."

If we are lucky, Obi-Wan thought. If we are very, very lucky.

Chapter Four

Anakin glanced at the radar. There was no traffic in the vicinity. Most transient ships stayed clear of the Uziel system, due to the troubles there. Now that Vanqor controlled the airspace, no one was eager to tangle with it.

Safe for the moment, Anakin let Rajana take over the piloting. He needed to keep a closer eye on the instruments.

Mezdec looked up from the navigation screen. “Everything all right?”

“I just want to take a look at the stabilizer controls,” Anakin said. “Without full power, we’ll be in trouble if something malfunctions. I had to reroute the cables from the left stabilizer in order to get lift. I want to make sure we didn’t pull too much power on the takeoff. I’m going to run a full status check.”

He set the status check in motion and watched as the computer ticked off the different indicators. Anakin decided to do a second check, this time manually. He couldn’t be too careful in a ship operating at less than full power. He scanned through the warning sensors.

“That’s odd,” he said to Mezdec. “I’m getting an indicator green on three power feeds on the escape pod. I’m showing two anti-grav generators.”

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“The pod does have two anti-grav generators,” Mezdec said. “It was upgraded in case it had to be used as a primary transport to get all the way back to Typha-Dor. Samdew sabotaged the pod, too.”

“I saw that,” Anakin said. “But there was no console indicator for an extra generator and three power feeds.”

“The feed indicators are in the pod itself,” Mezdec said.

“I see. I’ll check them there, then.” Anakin went back to the escape pod. He did a status check. Then he stopped by the small area where Obi-Wan had settled himself in the rear of the craft.

Anakin eased into a seat next to him. He leaned over casually and spoke in a low tone. “The escape pod is double-boosted. Highly unusual for this model. The indicators don’t run through the sensor array in the main cabin. In other words, I found Samdew’s back door. If I’d checked the pod itself, I could have fixed the problem on the transport. All that needed to be done was a rewiring job to suck power from the pod and bring it to the transport. We could have taken off with full power.”

“Can you do it now?”

Anakin shook his head. “Not while we’re flying. But that’s not the issue. I have one question.”

“Why didn’t Mezdec figure it out?” Obi-Wan interjected in a low tone. “Could it be an oversight?”

Anakin shrugged. “Sure. If he’s not very bright. But he seems to know his stuff. And he had a month to try to fix the transport.”

Obi-Wan frowned. “Something has been nagging at me. There were scorch marks on the comm console. Mezdec said that he came out of the sleeping quarters and saw Samdew at the comm unit. He saw that Samdew was sending a communication to the Vangors.”

Anakin nodded. “So he blasted the comm console to stop him.”

“A blast from that distance shouldn’t have left scorch marks on the panel,” Obi-Wan said.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

“Not unless he shot from very close,” Anakin agreed. “Maybe he was mistaken about where he was standing.”

“If he was close enough to blast the panel to leave scorch marks, wouldn’t you think he’d be close enough to stop Samdew without shooting? Why did he have a blaster, anyway? He said he’d been sleeping, and it was the middle of the night,” Obi-Wan said. “Anyway, the point is that he lied.”

“But the others came out and saw what happened,” Anakin said. “And Samdew shot Thik.”

“Think back, Padawan,” Obi-Wan said. “You are telling me the impression you got, not the words that were actually said.”

Anakin thought back, annoyed at himself. He had spoken quickly, without reviewing the conversation in his mind. That wasn’t consistent with his training.

He focused, as a Jedi should. He remembered the conversation clearly now, in the exact words and sequence the others had used. An exact memory was one of the tools of a Jedi mind.

“Samdew was dying when he tried to shoot Mezdec,” Anakin said. “That’s what Rajana and Thik saw. Thik just got in the way. So Samdew could have been shooting at Mezdec because *Mezdec* was the spy. But what about Samdew activating the fire system?”

“We only have Mezdec’s word for that, too,” Obi-Wan said. “We only have Mezdec’s word for everything, including the disabled transport.”

“Do you think he’s the spy?” Anakin asked.

“I don’t know,” Obi-Wan said.

Shalini had seen them talking, and she slid into a seat next to Obi-Wan. “Everything all right?”

Anakin glanced at his Master. Mezdec was Shalini’s husband. As the head of the group, she had a right to know what they were thinking. But where would her loyalties lie?

“Fine,” Obi-Wan said. “Tell us something. Did you have any other evidence that Samdew was the saboteur?”

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“What more evidence did we need?” Shalini said. “He killed four of us.”

“What do you think his plan was before he was interrupted?” Obi-Wan asked.

“We knew he was beginning his transmission to the Vanqor fleet,” Shalini said. “Luckily Mezdec intervened before they got a lock on our position. I imagine that his message would be that we had the invasion plans. Then he would kill us and take off.”

“In the disabled transport?”

“The Vanqors would send a transport, I suppose,” Shalini said. “What are you suggesting?”

“It seems an inefficient way for a spy to behave,” Obi-Wan said. “Far better to alert the Vanqors that their plans had been retrieved, then stay in place and hope for more chances to betray Typha-Dor.”

“Maybe he was an inefficient spy,” Shalini said. “Maybe his mission was over. Maybe he was tired of the cold.” She eyed Obi-Wan curiously. “Why don’t you say what you mean?”

“There could be another spy,” Obi-Wan said. “Or Samdew might have been innocent. He did not get a chance to defend himself.”

“He shot Thik!” Shalini said.

“He was aiming at Mezdec,” Obi-Wan reminded her. “The only person who had identified him as a spy.”

“What are you saying?” Hostility tinged Shalini’s words now.

Shalini’s voice had risen, and Thik and Olanz looked over. Rajana and Mezdec could not hear.

“We’re just going over what happened,” Obi-Wan said. “We want to make sure that what you think happened really happened.”

“I *know* what happened,” Shalini insisted.

“You know what Mezdec told you,” Obi-Wan said. “There is a difference. It could be a crucial one. Are you willing to gamble your planet’s freedom on your faith in him?”

“Yes,” Shalini said with complete certainty.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

"I'm not," Olanz said quietly, coming up with Thik. "The Jedi might have a point, Shalini. We are relying on Mezdec for our proof."

Shalini looked at the two of them with disbelief. "Mezdec is not a traitor. He is as loyal to Typha-Dor as I am, as committed to bringing the plans back as I am."

Anakin noticed that she touched her utility belt when she spoke.

"May we see the disk?" he asked.

Shalini looked at him angrily, but she reached into a hidden pocket on her belt and handed Obi-Wan the disk.

Obi-Wan accessed it on his datapad. It was empty of information.

Shalini stared at the disk in shock. "I don't know how..."

"Was the disk ever out of your sight?" Obi-Wan asked urgently.

She bit her lip. "No, never. But Mezdec checked my blaster and my emergency supplies on my utility belt before we left. He said he wanted to do it, to make sure I would be safe..." Her voice trailed off. "I have a second disk. I didn't tell Mezdec. The invasion plans are safe."

Rajana's voice rose. "I'm getting radar activity. I think it's a destroyer."

"Where is Mezdec?" Shalini cried. Mezdec had disappeared.

Anakin and Obi-Wan sprang up. "Emergency pod," Obi-Wan said.

They raced to the rear of the ship. Mezdec was accessing the emergency door. He ran inside.

The ship suddenly shook as laser cannonfire erupted. "We're under attack!" Rajana shouted from the cockpit. "I need help here!"

Both Jedi leaped toward the closing door to the escape pod. It locked down before they could reach it.

Obi-Wan swept his lightsaber down the door and the metal peeled back. But he was too late. Mezdec blasted out into space.

Chapter Five

“We should have been prepared for this,” Obi-Wan said.

“He won’t get very far very fast,” Anakin said. “I disabled half the power. I also cut the comm unit. I’d better get to the pilot seat.”

Anakin whirled and charged back toward the cockpit. Obi-Wan followed. Their best chance of escaping the Vanqor bombardment lay with his Padawan at the controls.

Their chances weren’t good. At half-power, the ship could not possibly outrun the Vanqor ship, and it would also be hard to maneuver.

Obi-Wan hurried back to the cockpit, where the others stood nervously around Anakin as he took over the controls. The Vanqor ship was behind them, a monster assault ship clad in black and silver. A flash came from the side of the ship.

“Torpedo,” Obi-Wan said.

Anakin made a hard right. The ship shuddered as it turned. The torpedo missed them.

Laser cannonfire began to boom. Anakin put the ship into a dive, but Obi-Wan could feel how the ship trembled. He exchanged a look with his apprentice. Anakin’s lips thinned. Obi-Wan knew he was determined to get them through. But even

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

Anakin couldn't work miracles. Obi-Wan began to study the map charts, looking for a place to set the ship down.

Unfortunately, the closest planet was Vanqor itself.

"Hang on!" Anakin shouted.

The ship staggered from a direct hit. Blue lightning skittered along the console.

"Ion blast," Anakin said. "We've lost most of our computer systems." He turned the ship again, trying to stay a moving target. He threw a glance at Obi-Wan. "We've got to get the ship down."

Obi-Wan looked at the others. "Our only choice is Vanqor."

The group exchanged glances. They had been through so much and accomplished so much. Landing on Vanqor and being captured could mean the end for all of them. But when they turned to Obi-Wan, not one of them looked afraid.

"If it is our only choice, let us take it," Thik said.

Anakin dipped the ship into the planet's atmosphere. "Can you give me a coordinate?" he asked Obi-Wan. "I don't have much time to maneuver, but I'll do what I can."

Obi-Wan didn't have time to consult the onboard references. He thought back on the holomaps he had studied. "Our best chance of evading capture is to land on the outskirts of the Tomo Craters," he said. "It's rugged terrain. We might be able to lose them there, if you can guide us to a safe landing." Obi-Wan quickly sat down at the computer and brought up the coordinates.

Anakin nodded briefly, too intent on keeping the ship on course to waste any movement. The ship rocked and shuddered under his hands. Suddenly it began to list to one side.

"The left stabilizer is failing," he muttered. "Everyone strap in. We're going to have to crash-land."

Vanqor loomed below, a large, multicolored planet. Obi-Wan knew from his research that it was primarily made up of deserts and dry, high plateaus. Cities were midsize and strung out along the few fertile valleys. The Tomo Craters area was a remote

Jude Watson

section that thousands of years ago had been hit by a meteor shower. Deep craters and fissures marked the dry land.

Suddenly an alarm began to sound. Red lights flashed in the cockpit. Another bank of lights lit up. Anakin didn't say a word. He didn't have to. Everyone knew what it meant: The ship was failing.

Instead of slowing, Anakin pushed his speed. Obi-Wan admired his cool. He knew what Anakin was counting on. The faster they got down, the better. He just wasn't sure what would happen when they got closer. Anakin would try to hug the surface, hiding from the ship above until he could land. Normally, Anakin would relish this challenge and perform it flawlessly. But with a wounded ship, he was taking big chances.

Obi-Wan prepared himself. They passed over a green valley, and Anakin brought the ship closer to the surface. The entire frame was shaking. Sirens blared and red lights flashed. The surface loomed closer. Red dirt was kicked up by their turbulence. It looked as though they were about to crash into boulders as big as buildings. The ship rolled to one side, nearly sending them into a massive rock formation. Anakin corrected it. Sweat beaded his upper lip.

Obi-Wan saw a smooth plateau ahead. Anakin would try to land there. He slowed his speed, and the ship wobbled, rolling from side to side. If they hadn't strapped in, they would have been flung against the walls.

"I've lost the left stabilizer completely!" Anakin shouted. "Hang on!"

The ship slammed into the unforgiving ground. Obi-Wan felt his body rise up as though it weighed nothing. He came down, jarring teeth and bones. He tasted blood in his mouth. The ship careened down the plateau, tearing chunks of vegetation and knocking into small boulders. The noise was tremendous. The ship suddenly seemed a fragile thing, shaking so hard Obi-Wan wondered if it would simply fall to pieces.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

The end of the plateau was less than fifty meters away. If the ship didn't stop moving, they would careen right off it, straight into the canyon bottom hundreds of meters below. Anakin frantically worked the controls. Obi-Wan saw the lip of the plateau approach. Slowly, slowly, the ship began to slide. A terrible groaning noise, worse than the harsh grating of the crash, rose in the air around them, battering their ears like a physical force. The ship suddenly tipped almost all the way to one side, slamming Obi-Wan against the console.

Then the ship crashed against a boulder and stopped.

Obi-Wan looked around. Thik looked pale. No doubt the bumpy landing had been hard on his injury. Shalini's forehead was bleeding. Olanz and Rajana looked shaken but all right.

"We've got to get out of here fast," Obi-Wan said.

He unbuckled himself and Anakin did the same. They helped the others to quickly extricate themselves from their seats. The landing ramp wouldn't engage, and the door had been mangled from the landing. Obi-Wan and Anakin set to work with their lightsabers to cut a hole through the hull.

Anakin suddenly stopped. He bent over to look through the viewport. "They must have contacted Vanqor planetary security. Guard ships are approaching," he said. "They've located us."

"Do you have any smoke grenades and air masks aboard?" Obi-Wan asked Shalini.

"I'll get them," Rajana said. She hurried down the aisle of the ship, holding on to seat backs to stay upright.

Obi-Wan spoke even as they continued to peel back the hull with their lightsabers. "Our best chance is to launch down that canyon on cables. Anakin, you take Shalini and Olanz. I'll take Thik and Rajana. We'll use the smoke grenades for cover. Turn on your tracking device in case we lose each other."

The hole was big enough now. Obi-Wan tossed out two smoke grenades. The acrid smoke billowed out. Without much wind, the smoke hung in the air, a perfect cover. One by one,

Jude Watson

wearing air masks to protect their lungs, they slid through the hole.

They were still out of range of the starship's weapons. They had only minutes now. They began to run toward the edge of the plateau.

Shaken from the landing, some of the group could not move fast. Thik, with his bad knee, was especially slow. Obi-Wan and Anakin helped them along, but within seconds, Obi-Wan did a quick calculation and realized they couldn't make it. The starships could begin shooting through the smoke at any moment. The Vangors might not be able to pinpoint their location, but they certainly could figure out where they were headed. It was the only avenue of escape.

Obi-Wan felt desperate. The question was, would the ships try to kill them or take them prisoner?

They couldn't see the starships, but the first fire tore up the ground in front of them. They jumped back. The fire was constant, preventing them from reaching the edge of the plateau.

"Back to the ship!" Obi-Wan called. It would at least offer some cover.

They ran, the fire behind them now. Shalini tripped, but Anakin picked her up and dove underneath the belly of the ship. Thik was still moving too slowly. He was not keeping up with the others and would be a prime target when the smoke cleared. Obi-Wan grabbed him. He ran forward to push Thik into an empty space where crushed metal had created a cubbyhole.

He saw too late that there was only room for one. Obi-Wan pushed Thik into the space and kept on going. The smoke was starting to clear. Obi-Wan dived for a boulder and took shelter behind it. He was wedged in between the boulder and a larger one behind him. There was barely room, but he doubted he could be seen from above.

The starships landed. The group huddled under their own ship. Obi-Wan saw Shalini move toward Anakin. She handed him something and spoke rapidly in his ear.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

The disk. She had handed him the disk.

Obi-Wan realized that the Vanqors had decided on capture. They could have easily blown up the ship by now if they'd wanted.

Dozens of troops exited their ship. A squad headed for the downed ship while another peeled off to search the area.

Obi-Wan searched his hiding place. He realized that if he could squeeze a bit further behind the boulder, it opened up into a small cavelike opening impossible to see unless you were right on top of it. It offered a perfect place to hide.

He could not do them any good by being captured too. It tore at him to leave his Padawan, but it was his only hope.

He squeezed back into the hole, then doubled over to fit himself into the space. From here he could see through a crevice in the rock out to the ship.

Soldiers rounded up the group and herded them onto their starships. Obi-Wan's heart ached. There was no way he and Anakin alone could fend off dozens of soldiers and well-armed enemy ships.

The starships took off and shot away into the distance. Slowly, Obi-Wan hauled himself up. He panted out his exhaustion and his frustration.

Then he made himself stand and turned his thoughts toward rescue.

Chapter Six

The soldiers had bound their hands behind them and pushed them aboard the starships. Anakin felt the disk burn against his skin. So far he had not been searched, but he would use the Force to divert attention. Shalini had entrusted the disk to him, and he wouldn't fail her.

She had spoken rapidly in his ear. "Take this. It will be safest in the hands of the Jedi. For the safety of my people, please get it back to Typha-Dor."

"I pledge my life on it," Anakin had said.

The starships flew over the deep fissures of the Tomo Craters. On the lip of a crater, a small compound huddled. Out of the viewport, Anakin glimpsed gray buildings, energy fences, security towers, and a small landing pad.

"Welcome to paradise," one of the soldiers snickered. "The Tomo Camp."

Dressed in his survival suit like the others, with his lightsaber safely hidden, Anakin was not identified as a Jedi. Shalini refused to give her name, along with the others. The admitting guard didn't seem to care. They were searched, but Anakin was able to use the Force to confuse his guard, and his cable launcher, his lightsaber, and the disk were not taken. They were stripped of their survival gear and given rough brown tunics to wear. Then

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

they were herded out into a small yard surrounded by energy fencing. The wind was cold and tore at their clothes. Around them swirled other prisoners from other worlds in the Uziel system, planets already conquered by Vanqor.

Anakin looked around. The walls of the crater were sheer and hundreds of meters tall. It was clear that the only way into the camp was by air.

How would Obi-Wan rescue him? The ship had been destroyed in the crash.

The answer was that Obi-Wan most likely would not be able to get to him. It was all up to Anakin. Anakin did not mind this knowledge. He didn't mind depending on his own skill.

He had a time limit. Shalini had told them that the invasion was due in only three days. He would have to find a way to escape soon. The key to the survival of the entire planet of Typha-Dor lay hidden in his tunic pocket. He had managed to conceal the disk from the guards, but he didn't kid himself that he would be able to evade the heavy security measures by the Force alone.

He had made the mistake once of thinking he was more powerful than he was. He would never do it again. He would not make a move until he was sure.

An Uziel prisoner in a faded uniform drifted near them. "What's the news? Have the Vanqors invaded Typha-Dor?"

Shalini's eyes glinted. "No. And if they do, we will drive them back."

The prisoner looked weary. "That's what we said on Zilior."

"Have there been any escape attempts here?" Shalini asked.

"One. He's dead. My advice is to accept your fate." The prisoner drifted away.

"I make my own fate," Shalini said to her cohorts. She looked at Anakin. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Not yet," Anakin said easily, sitting down on the cold ground.

Jude Watson

“What are you doing?” Shalini asked. “Aren’t you going to do something?”

“I am,” Anakin said. Tuning out the others, he began to watch.

There was only one solution. Anakin had to get to the transport pool. The question was when. There were four groups of guards on eight-hour shifts, so that overlap guaranteed that one group was always relatively fresh. In addition, sentry droids constantly buzzed the compound. It wasn’t impossible. But it would take the right timing.

Anakin still had his lightsaber and his cable launcher. He could launch over the energy fence, but then he would have to cross thirty meters of open space to get to the transport pool. The transports were heavily guarded, but not the ones needing repair. If he made it to the repair shed, he could slip inside. He would just have to hope that he could fix a transport and take off before his absence was noted.

He couldn’t take the others. He would have to escape alone, and hope to return for them.

There was no sense waiting. He would escape that night.

The gate door slid back. An officer entered, surrounded by guards and droids. He began to walk through the crowd as the prisoners shrank back.

“What’s going on?” Shalini whispered.

“A sweep,” a prisoner muttered next to her. “They come every few weeks and take several of us.”

“No one ever comes back,” someone else murmured. “They take them to an unmarked building. There are rumors of medical experiments.”

The officer pointed a finger at one prisoner, then another. The guards surrounded them and herded them together.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

Then the officer wheeled about and pointed directly at Anakin. "Him."

"No," Shalini whispered.

Anakin considered resisting. With a glance at the others the guards had herded together, he decided he could not. He knew that if a battle ensued, others would die.

And there were reasons to submit. Security could be a bit more lax at the facility where they were taking him. Anakin fell into step behind the others.

They were led to a gray building with no sign outside. When they were ushered inside, Anakin's nose twitched. It smelled like chemicals. So the rumors could be true. The prisoners exchanged uneasy glances.

They were prodded along the hallway and pushed into a bare white room. There a holoscreen took up an entire wall. An image of a human male dressed in a med coat appeared on the screen. He smiled gently.

"Do not fear. You will not be harmed. On the contrary, you are about to enjoy the experience for which we have chosen you. Welcome to the Zone of Self-Containment. A doctor will be with you shortly to explain. In the meantime, relax."

"Relax," one of the prisoners snorted. "Good advice, med-head."

The holo image blinked off.

"What did he say?" another one of the imprisoned soldiers asked. "The Zone of Self-Containment? What are they going to do to us?" He pressed his fingers to his forehead. "I feel strange."

Anakin, too, felt light-headed. He suddenly realized why the information had been given to them by a holo image instead of a real person.

"The room is filled with some kind of gas. They've drugged us," he said as his vision blurred. He felt his knees turn to water. One of the prisoners slumped to the floor.

Jude Watson

Anakin felt himself slipping downward. He fought the sensation of the gas. The others slipped into unconsciousness. He held himself in readiness. He tried to move his legs and found that they were too heavy.

He was the only one conscious when the technicians entered the room in masks. He saw, but he could not move a finger. The technicians began to load the other prisoners onto repulsorlift stretchers.

"Look at this one, he's still awake," one of the technicians said, drawing closer to Anakin. "Never seen that before."

"He's not too happy about being here, either," another said.

One of them leaned closer to Anakin. "Don't fight it, friend. We just want some cooperation in the beginning. I guarantee you'll like your stay here."

Using every ounce of his will and strength, Anakin grabbed the technician by the collar and brought his face even closer. "Don't...bet...on it."

The technician yelped and struggled to free himself. "Help! For galaxy's sake!"

The other two rushed over. Anakin could not fight the three of them. He was thrown onto the stretcher and strapped down. He dipped in and out of consciousness as the stretcher was powered down the hall. A door opened. The light hurt his eyes.

They began to undress him. *My lightsaber*, Anakin thought. *The disk*. He had retained his utility belt and concealed the disk inside a hidden slit. He had concealed his lightsaber by lodging it against his body underneath the tunic, strapping the belt tight against the hilt.

He could not summon the Force enough to distract the technicians from finding it. He was helpless. Only luck could save him from discovery. The belt was unstrapped and hit the tiled floor with a soft thud. His tunic followed. The technician scooped up the bundle and tossed it in a storage box with clothes from the other prisoners.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

Anakin shut his eyes against the harsh light. He felt himself being lifted and slipped into water. He tried to fight, afraid he would drown.

“Relax, friend,” the technician said. “It’s just a bath.”

The water was warm. He slid against the side. He was strapped in so that his head wouldn’t slip beneath the surface. Anakin’s mind drifted as though he were floating off on a deep, dark lake.

He must have slept. When he woke, he was dry and was wearing a fresh tunic, this one a soft material, in dark blue. He was lying on a sleep couch. The sleep had refreshed him. He felt relaxed and energized. He stretched, marveling at how fluid his limbs felt. The paralyzing drug effects had worn off, but strangely, had left him feeling limber.

He recognized the technician who handed him a pillow. “Feel better? Told you so. Almost time for the evening meal.”

Anakin shook his head.

“They all refuse at first,” the med technician said. “Don’t worry, the food isn’t drugged. We all eat together, workers and patients.”

Anakin shrugged. Maybe the man was telling the truth. Maybe not. Oddly, Anakin didn’t care. It was as though cool water had run through his veins, calming every impulse, every desire.

He walked to the dining hall. Tables were set up, and other patients and med workers were eating. There was a long table with platters heaped with fruits and vegetables, pastries and meats. Anakin saw that everyone ate from the same plates, so he took some food and ate it.

He chewed, wondering what would come next. He supposed something would happen soon. When it did, he would react.

The need to help Typha-Dor seemed so distant now. Someone else would help the planet. There was always someone else to do something, if you waited. He would just pass the time here and see what the Vangors were up to. That could be

Jude Watson

valuable to the Typha-Dor, too. He needn't worry about the invasion right now.

He ate and followed some other prisoners out into the courtyard. Warming lights had been set up, and the air was comfortable. Flowers grew, and large, leafy trees. Anakin found a bench and sat. He felt something he had not felt in a long, long time, not since he was a little boy nestled in his mother's embrace: peace.

I'll fight it soon. When I need to escape, I will. But right now...right now, would it be so wrong to enjoy it?

Chapter Seven

Obi-Wan waited until the starships were out of sight. He couldn't risk a long transmission to the Temple. But he would have to risk a distress call. The calls would be coded and scrambled, and he would have to hope it could reach the Temple.

They could lock on his position and send help. It would take almost two days to arrive, but he had to risk it.

The tracking device tucked in Anakin's tunic beeped a steady signal. Obi-Wan trudged back to the ship. He climbed through the hole and went to the rear cargo hold. He had to cut through the crunched door with his lightsaber. He remembered that they had loaded one swoop aboard. They had to leave the rest behind because Anakin needed to lighten the ship's load as much as possible.

The swoop was dented from slamming back and forth between the cargo hold's walls, but it still worked. Anakin had made sure of that before they left the outpost. Now he had transportation. Obi-Wan only hoped that Anakin was close enough to get to on a swoop. It was small, built for short distances, and it didn't hold much fuel.

He climbed aboard and took off. The tracking device led him over the high plateaus and desert lands surrounding the Tono Craters. He looked down as he sped over the terrain, glad he

Jude Watson

wasn't on foot. The plateaus were high and steep, and trails led to dead ends and switchbacks. It would have taken days to traverse the distance. Obi-Wan stayed as close to the ground as he dared, trying to evade scanners and surveillance from above. The tracking device led him on as the sun slid lower in the sky.

The fuel read EMPTY and the engine began to sputter. By Obi-Wan's reckoning he was still at least twenty kilometers from Anakin. He had no choice. He had to land.

He pulled the swoop into a cave, entering the coordinates on his datapad. He might need it later, if he could find some fuel. He started to walk.

It was hard going. Obi-Wan hiked up and down steep slopes of thin rock shale that occasionally broke into dangerous rockslides. At last he stopped to rest when the source of the tracking device's transmission was in sight.

Obi-Wan studied the camp through his electrobinoculars. The good news was that the perimeter security wasn't heavy, most likely because the camp relied on its inaccessibility.

He had reached the heart of the Tomo Craters. A careful survey of the ground made Obi-Wan conclude that camp security was correct not to worry about escaping prisoners. If Obi-Wan could manage to scramble up and down cliffs and hike through canyons without disturbing a nest of gundarks or getting attacked by various other horrifying creatures, he *might* make it to the outskirts of the camp. Then he would have to scale a sheer rock wall two hundred meters high. He would be vulnerable with every centimeter he traveled. It would be better to go in by air.

Of course, he didn't have a transport. That could be a problem.

He sat on a high peak, underneath an outcropping of rocks. He watched the camp operations for the rest of the waning evening. Transports flew in and out in a regular pattern, ferrying supplies and possibly carrying troops back and forth. Obi-Wan guessed that the camp must also be a base of some sort.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

He could wait for a few days to see if his message had reached the Temple. But what if it hadn't?

Rescue was his first priority. He had to get that disk to Typha-Dor.

And if Anakin didn't have the disk, what would you do? If Shalini had given it to you, would you take it to Typha-Dor and abandon him?

The answer should have been easy. As a Jedi, his commitment was to the galaxy. He would have had to go to Typha-Dor without Anakin. Would he have attempted a rescue anyway, knowing that Anakin would be waiting for him? He was glad he didn't have to make that choice.

The flight pattern of the ships was always the same. They dipped low as they came in, then landed close to the edge of the plateau, where a short landing pad was surrounded by energy fencing.

Obi-Wan surveyed the area carefully. He thought back on the beginning of the mission, when he'd been brooding about how careful he had become, how much he now weighed risks and thought things through.

Well, he had thought things through, and he had decided that this plan was crazy. He could get pummeled by rocks. He could crash into a crater hundreds of meters below. He could be spotted and blasted into thin air.

All of these scenarios were likely. It was a risky plan. It bordered on stupid.

Which meant that perhaps he wasn't so careful after all.

Chapter Eight

Once, Anakin and Obi-Wan had taken a few weeks to travel through the grasslands of the planet Belazura, strictly for pleasure. Obi-Wan considered the planet to be among the most beautiful in the galaxy, and he wanted to show it to Anakin. Anakin remembered Obi-Wan telling him that even the life of the Jedi must include time to reflect among beautiful surroundings. Anakin's only instructions during the trip were to enjoy himself. He had.

He had seen fields of grasses that ranged from light sunny yellows to deep greens. He had seen golden fields dotted with deep red flowers. Blue skies had surrounded them like a halo of light. He remembered that he was never hot, and never cold. That the breeze against his skin had felt as soft as his mother's touch.

It had been a peaceful time he had returned to again and again in his daydreams. And now he was experiencing it once more.

To Anakin's surprise, he underwent no treatments. He was not drugged again. He was not treated like a prisoner. His room was spare, with just a sleep couch and table, but he had access to a sunny area inside and the courtyard outside. Anakin found that he wanted nothing more than to sit there, his face tilted to the warming lights, watching the shadow patterns of the leaves on

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

the wall. He found that it was easy to contemplate the different greens of the leaves for hours. Yet it was not the mindlessness of the meditation he had been taught. He did not leave his body. He did not leave his cares. He could see them as though they were off at a distance. They had nothing to do with him. He knew that everything would work out as it should.

He was not sure how much time had passed. Maybe no more than a day or two. Anakin occasionally thought about escaping. The thought would drift across his mind like a warm breeze, and then disappear.

One afternoon two med technicians came into the garden and stood before him. "Someone would like to see you, Prisoner 42601."

Anakin rose and followed them. He felt a slight curiosity. They walked on either side of him, not touching him or restraining him in any way. There was no need to.

Anakin was led into an office. The technicians left, shutting the door quietly behind them. Unlike the rest of the complex, which was comfortable but spare, this office was full of color and luxury. A thick, patterned carpet was on the floor and septsilk curtains in deep blue hung at the windows. He thought he could smell a pleasant perfume. He sat down in a soft chair and leaned back against a rose-colored pillow.

A human woman walked into the room. Her blond hair was threaded with silver and coiled at the nape of her neck. She was older, he sensed, but he could not tell by her face, which was unlined and smooth. Her eyes were penetrating but warm.

Instead of sitting behind the desk, she perched on the edge of it. "Thank you for coming."

Anakin nodded. He could hear a ghost in his head, a murmur of the person he had been. That person would have said, *Did I have a choice?* But now he did not feel like challenging this person, this woman with the pretty hair and the warm smile.

"I asked to see you," she said. "I am the doctor who invented the Zone of Self-Containment. You have seen that we haven't

Jude Watson

lied to you. Your experience is about pleasure, not pain. I have a theory that if you are surrounded by pleasant things and no worries, your mind will elevate to that level. Are you happy here?"

Anakin considered the question. Happy? Suddenly he felt confused. What did the word mean? Had he ever been happy? He remembered a flash of a young boy, running home through narrow streets. He remembered laughing with his friend Tru Veld, a fellow Padawan who he had not seen in a year. He could locate the memory, but not the feeling.

For some reason, his confusion made her smile. "Wrong question. Let me rephrase. Are you content?"

That he could answer. "Yes."

"Good. That is our goal. Now. The reason I asked for you is that the technicians tell me that you were able to fight the paralyzing agent we used when you first arrived. I should explain that the agent is used only to allay any anxiety you might feel. Naturally as prisoners of war you would suspect that something terrible might happen to you. The agent was only used to make the experience more comfortable for you. You needed to be bathed and dressed, and the paralyzer allowed us to do that without you or the technicians getting hurt. It was for everyone's benefit, you see."

That seemed reasonable, but Anakin said nothing. Although he was perfectly content to talk to this doctor, and was enjoying this wonderful peace he felt, being here had not completely erased the memory of being a Jedi. He did not necessarily trust what this doctor had to say.

"It is impossible to resist that paralyzing gas, yet you assaulted a technician."

"I grabbed his collar," Anakin corrected pleasantly.

"And you spoke to him."

"It seemed appropriate under the circumstances."

She nodded in appreciation. "I see that though you are in the zone, you still have your wits about you."

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

"I don't like to abandon them completely, no," Anakin offered.

She studied him now. Anakin could feel sunlight touch his face. His skin warmed, and he wanted to close his eyes to enjoy the sensation, but he didn't.

"I feel something in you," she said. "There is a mastery of your body, of your mind. I've seen it before. Have you ever heard of the Force?"

Anakin did not show by a flick of muscle that the question had startled him. His Jedi training ran deeper than anything else. He felt it stir, and he leaned into it for support. "No."

She nodded again, slightly. "That may be true, and it may not. If you don't know it already, you might be Force-sensitive. That means you could have special abilities."

Wary now, Anakin shrugged. He didn't want to discuss the Force with this woman. He wanted to go back to the garden. The quickest way to do this, he knew, was to seem bored by her questions.

"Did you ever see something happen before it actually happened?" she asked.

He made himself look blank. "I don't think so."

"Are your reaction times unusually fast? Do you have an unusually strong focus?"

He took a long pause that stretched for a moment. She leaned forward in anticipation.

"Uh, what was the question?"

She made an impatient gesture. "*Were* your reaction times unusually fast? Before you came here."

"I was always the first to reach the table for a meal."

She leaned back, disappointed. Her eyes went blank. It was as though now that she was bored with him, he didn't exist.

"You can go back to the garden now."

Anakin stood and left the room. He walked back to the courtyard. The doctor was working for the Vanqors. She wasn't a native Vanqor. Vanqors were humans, but they all dressed in

Jude Watson

gray tunics and didn't adorn their clothing. She was an outlander, no question.

There was a time he would have been on fire to discover who she was and why she was here. But today the sun shone, and it was warm in the courtyard. And it was almost time for the midday meal.

Chapter Nine

Even with the help of the cable launcher, it took Obi-Wan hours to scale the peak. The sun was setting as he reached the top and sat down to rest under a rock outcropping that had created a small cave. He would need all his strength for his task.

Over the wide chasm below, he saw the camp. He was close enough to see without electrobinoculars beings moving about. He watched as a small transport came toward him. He knew he could not be seen, so he was able to study the flight line of the ship. It buzzed overhead, seeming close enough to touch, then zoomed down to land at the camp landing platform.

Obi-Wan fingered his cable launcher. If he timed it exactly right, he should be able to hook onto the underside of a low-flying transport. They wouldn't be able to feel the drag for that short a distance. He would let himself be towed by the transport and then drop to the ground during the landing. If everything went right.

If something went wrong, he'd be squashed like a bug against the side of a crater.

He rolled himself up into his thermal cape and told himself to go to sleep. Worrying about Anakin would only interfere with the rest he needed. Yet the sky turned black and many stars had appeared before he felt sleep overtake him.

Jude Watson

He smelled the dawn in his sleep before he woke. The freshness of the air infiltrated his dreams, and when he opened his eyes he felt hopeful.

He stretched in the chill, trying to warm his muscles. He munched on a protein cube as he made his preparations. He tested the cable several times. His life depended on its strength.

Trust your materials, but test them twice.

Yes, Qui-Gon.

The first transport came in too high. The second, too fast. Obi-Wan crouched in the shadow of the rocks. Patience was necessary. He couldn't make a mistake.

The next transport came in low and kept reducing speed. It was a midsize cruiser, big enough that it would not feel the jolt of the launcher or the drag of his body—he hoped. He didn't think he'd get a better opportunity.

As the shadow of the cruiser touched the peak, Obi-Wan aimed and sent the cable flying. It latched onto the underbelly of the ship. He was yanked upward with such force he nearly lost consciousness. He had expected a bad jolt, but not this bad. With the wind whistling past his ears and his body whirling and flopping, he tried to get his hands around the cable. He had to steady himself if this was going to work.

His arms were nearly wrenched from their sockets as he held onto the cable. He tucked his knees up and his chin down. He kept his finger on the cable control. He brought himself up closer to the body of the ship, knowing he couldn't get too close or he'd be burned by the exhausts as the ship began to land.

A boulder loomed ahead. He activated the launcher to get closer to the ship. He zoomed up as the rock approached, passing under him by a few meters. He activated the launcher to drop him again, out of reach of the rocket exhaust. He couldn't be this close when the ship began to land or he'd be burned to a cinder.

A large rock formation appeared out of nowhere. Obi-Wan quickly tucked his legs up, but the ship bumped on an air current

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

and his shoulder slammed against the rock. Pain shot through him. He held on. The ship banked, nearly slamming him into a cliff wall.

Maybe this wasn't such a smart idea.

The muscles in his arms and legs began to shake, and his fingers clenched in the effort to hold on to the cable.

Obi-Wan called on the Force to help him. He was part of the ship, part of the air, part of the cable itself. He would move when he needed to move, he would allow the grace of the ship to pull him to a safe landing....

The pilot of the transport apparently liked to show off. He dipped the transport sideways and wagged its wings. Obi-Wan was whipped from side to side.

Safe landing? I'll be lucky if I make it without being squashed.

The landing platform was ahead. He would have to drop off quickly, very close to the perimeter wall. If not, he could be spotted.

The ship slowed and dipped. Obi-Wan counted out the seconds. At the last possible moment, he disengaged the cable. Bracing himself, he fell through the air, landing hard. He felt the jolt up to his eyebrows. He rolled and ducked behind a parked ship.

He caught his breath as the ship he had hitched a ride on came to a stop. Droids began to unload cargo. He saw a small utility shed nearby and quickly headed for it.

The shed held tools and equipment. Obi-Wan searched and was glad to find what he was looking for, a bin full of greasy coveralls. He pulled a pair on. Then he quickly darted out of the shed. His surveillance through his electrobinoculars had given him a rough outline of the camp. He knew the prisoners filed out into the yard at this time. There was always some confusion as they poured out of the buildings. He couldn't have arrived at a better time.

He walked briskly across the landing pad as if he belonged there. Then he struck out toward the fenced yard. He had tucked

Jude Watson

a servodriver in his pocket, and he pretended to be checking the energy fence as he moved down, searching the crowd for Anakin.

He saw Shalini. She sat, removed from the others, close to the fence. Her head was bowed and her hands were clasped in front of her. He made his way down the length of the fence toward her.

She lifted her head as he came near. At first she didn't see him. Her gaze passed over him, just another one of her captors, as she sought the sky. Then she jerked her gaze back to him. Obi-Wan admired her discipline. She gave no sign that she had recognized him. Instead she casually scooted back until she was closer to the fence. She absently drew in the dirt with a finger, looking casual.

"Is everyone all right?" Obi-Wan asked, bending over with the servodriver.

"Yes. But Anakin has been taken away. No one knows why."

"Where?"

"There is a gray building across the compound. Unmarked. He was taken there. Listen, they don't know who we are yet. They don't know he's a Jedi. Which makes me think."

He was anxious to find Anakin, but Obi-Wan bent closer to hear what Shalini would say. "If Mezdec had gone straight to Vanqor, he would be there by now. He would have told them we were traveling in Vanqor airspace and they would have figured out who we are. Which tells me that Mezdec didn't go to Vanqor."

"Where do you think he went?"

"I think he went to Typha-Dor. He would assume that either we had been captured or we were still making our way there."

"But why would he go to Typha-Dor?"

"To deliver the invasion plans. But not the real ones."

Obi-Wan let out a breath. "Of course. They would accept whatever he would bring as real."

"He will destroy us single-handedly," Shalini said, her voice raw. "All is lost."

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

“No,” Obi-Wan said. “If we can make it in time—”

“Anakin has the disk. You must get it—”

“You there!” An angry voice cut through Shalini’s words. “Attendance check!”

“Find him and go. Don’t worry about us. Save Typha-Dor.”

Shalini rose and walked off, unwilling to risk exposing Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan tucked the servodriver in his pocket and went off in search of the building Shalini had indicated. He knew from experience that wearing dirty coveralls and affecting a purposeful stride would render him close to invisible.

He found the building and decided his best course was to walk right in. He was making up his plans now as he went along, counting on his connection to the Force to guide him. He found himself in a small vestibule. A security checkpoint was just inside the plain durasteel door.

“Checking on those valves in the air handlers,” Obi-Wan said.

The officer looked down at his datascreen. “I didn’t get an alert.”

Obi-Wan shrugged. “I’ll come back. They probably won’t blow.”

The officer nodded, then did a double take. “Hold on. Probably?”

Obi-Wan shrugged again.

The officer sighed. “I’m not going to get blamed for this one. Come on in.” He pressed a button, deactivating the security shield. Obi-Wan strolled in, as though he had all the time in the world.

As soon as he was out of sight, he walked rapidly down the corridors, looking in open doors and observation windows. Many of the rooms were empty. He rounded a corner and saw a pair of double doors. Through a window he saw a courtyard dappled with sunlight.

He drew closer to the window. Anakin sat on a bench, his hands in his lap. He didn’t appear to have been abused. He

Jude Watson

wasn't in pain. Nothing about him had altered, and yet...he looked different somehow.

Something was wrong. Something was off. And Obi-Wan didn't have time to analyze it. He had to get Anakin out of here.

Chapter Ten

Anakin was thinking about detachment. It was the goal of Jedi training. It was a discipline that took years to learn. It was not about controlling emotion, but allowing it to flow through you.

Well, he certainly felt detached. He knew somehow he had been drugged, his brain chemistry altered, even though he wasn't sure how it had been done. Was this how it felt, he wondered, to be truly one with the Force? It was a peaceful place to be, so unlike the battles he usually fought in his mind and heart. Was it so terrible to reach this place through a simple procedure, rather than through years of study and trial? He had admired Obi-Wan's serenity, had envied it. Now he had it. Why did he feel that Obi-Wan would not value it?

The flash of irritation he felt at his Master was gone in a moment, almost before he had felt it. Anakin smiled. That was certainly something he was unable to do on his own. Being able to think about his Master without emotion was an interesting experience.

Sunlight flashed on the double doors. Someone was entering the garden. At first the sun was in his eyes. Then he saw that it was his Master, dressed in coveralls. No doubt he had come to rescue him. Anakin noted that he should feel glad. Yet he did

Jude Watson

not. Did he feel disappointed? He couldn't locate an actual feeling.

"Anakin? Are you all right?" Obi-Wan's voice was low.

"I'm fine," he said.

"We have to get out of here. I have a way out."

"That's good." It was good that Obi-Wan had a way out. Anakin stood. He moved with the same alertness he always had, but something was different. It was as though he was watching himself from above.

Yet how good it was to fall into step beside Obi-Wan. Good because he felt so peaceful. How pleasant it was to be Obi-Wan's companion and yet not worry about the emotion connected with that.

Obi-Wan peered into his face. "What did they do to you?"

Anakin decided at that moment that he must not tell his Master what had been done to him. There was no reason to. No doubt the effect would wear off soon, and until then he wanted to spin out the peace he'd found without Obi-Wan judging how he'd found it.

"Nothing." Technically, this was true. He'd received no drugs that he knew about. "I suppose they had plans for us."

Obi-Wan gave him a quick look, as though he didn't believe him. But they didn't have time to stop.

Obi-Wan led him to a utility closet. There, he gave Anakin a medic's pale blue coat. "Do you still have the disk?"

The disk. How odd that he hadn't thought of it. But Obi-Wan had, of course. Was that why his Master had come? For the disk. Not for him. There had been a time when he would have pondered on this, and the thought would have given him pain.

Anakin wrenched his mind back to Obi-Wan's question. It seemed to take more effort than it should to remember what had happened to the disk.

"I know where it is. It's with my lightsaber."

Obi-Wan gave him an odd look. "And where is that?"

"Where we bathe. There are storage bins."

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

“Show me.”

Obi-Wan followed behind Anakin so that it would not seem that they were together. Anakin led him into the room with the large tubs. It was empty. He walked to the storage bin, which was jumbled with the same tunics and belts.

“In here.”

With a sound of exasperation, Obi-Wan plunged his hands into the bin. He sorted through the tunics and belts. Anakin bent over to help. He found his belt and removed the disk. Obi-Wan handed Anakin his lightsaber. Then he took the disk from Anakin and slipped it inside his tunic.

“Once we get out of here, we’ll head straight for the landing pad,” Obi-Wan said crisply. “We’re going to have to steal a transport. Can you do that?”

Why was Obi-Wan talking to him as though he were a fourth-year student? “Of course.”

“Follow me then.”

Obi-Wan led the way. As they approached the security desk, Obi-Wan began talking loudly.

“If I say that the valve shutoff is broken, then it’s broken. There’s no need to talk to my superior.” Obi-Wan rolled his eyes at the security officer. “He’s going to tell you the same thing I said. I said, it’s broken, you have to shut down the system. If you want to know about a bacta bath, go to a medic. If you want to know about valves, come to me. Understand?” Obi-Wan kept talking as the security guard released the security shield. Obi-Wan activated the door and waited for Anakin to walk through. “He’s going to say the same thing. You have to shut down the system....”

The door hissed closed behind them. Obi-Wan headed down the path. Anakin strode next to him. He was content to follow his Master’s plan.

No one stopped them as they walked across the compound and moved onto the landing pad.

Jude Watson

“This looks fast.” Obi-Wan climbed up on a small starship. “We need something that can get us to Typha-Dor.” He accessed the cockpit and jumped in. “Let’s go, Anakin.”

Anakin leaped up on the starship and slid into the cockpit next to his Master. He looked at the controls. “I’m going to have to hot-wire it,” he said.

“That’s the idea,” Obi-Wan answered.

Anakin opened the sensor panel. Even though he still existed in the bubble of his calm, he remembered exactly what to do. He switched wires and juiced the ignition. Then he closed the panel and slid back into the pilot’s seat. The engine started on the first try.

“Great,” Obi-Wan said with relief. “Let’s get out of here. Now,” he added urgently, as a security officer began to wave frantically at them. No doubt he assumed they’d forgotten the departure check proceedings.

Anakin eased the throttle. The graceful ship rose, and he shot away from the camp.

Obi-Wan let out an audible sigh. “Things aren’t usually that easy.”

Anakin glanced at the cockpit indicators. “They aren’t this time, either. Apparently by hot-wiring the ship, we skipped an essential step in the procedure.”

A red light was blinking on the console. Obi-Wan leaned forward. “What’s that?”

“We should have entered a code on the ground. It’s a system to prevent escapes, I guess.”

“And what is it?” Obi-Wan asked impatiently.

“The ship is programmed to self-destruct,” Anakin answered.

Chapter Eleven

"I'd guess we have about four seconds," Anakin said as he increased the ship's speed, heading toward the surface.

"You *guess*?"

Anakin cut back on the speed, almost throwing Obi-Wan to the floor. He leveled out the ship. "We'd better jump."

Anakin's calm was getting to Obi-Wan. "Excellent notion." *Considering that the ship is about to explode.*

Anakin raised the cockpit dome. They jumped to the top of their seats. Obi-Wan knew he had about two seconds to pick a place to land. Anakin had plotted the course well. They weren't over rocks, but a gradual slope. Still, landing would be tricky.

"Jump!" Anakin shouted as the siren began to sound.

They jumped. The Force pulsed around them. Obi-Wan looked down at the hard ground below. It became less than solid in his mind, an accumulation of particles and pebbles. It would yield to him. He would fall as lightly as a leaf.

He landed hard for the second time that day. Obi-Wan groaned. The Force was with him, yes, but the ground was still hard. He landed more like a tree trunk than a leaf. He fell onto his shoulder. He felt his tunic rip and a rock scrape his cheek.

Anakin landed more gracefully, seemingly without effort, and went into a roll to absorb the shock.

Jude Watson

Above them, the ship exploded.

Now the danger was from the sheets of falling, flaming metal. Obi-Wan and Anakin kept rolling down the slope, gaining speed now. Obi-Wan saw a cluster of boulders ahead and simply rolled right up to it. Anakin did the same. They huddled in the shelter of the largest boulder, watching the metal fall to the surface and burn out.

Obi-Wan leaned against the boulder. "That was fun."

"Sorry, Master. I didn't realize."

"Not your fault. There was no way to know." Obi-Wan sighed. "Without transport, we've got a problem," he said. "We're in the middle of a wilderness infested with gundarks."

"We've got another problem," Anakin said. He pointed to the sky. A fleet of STAPs and two security transports with mounted laser cannons were headed toward them.

"No doubt the self-destruct sensor sends a signal back to the camp that an escape is in progress," Anakin said.

"No doubt," Obi-Wan said dryly. He scanned the area for cover. The only good cover lay in the deep craters. "Here's a question. Would you rather take your chances with a fleet of STAPs or a nest of gundarks?"

The first laser cannonfire thundered. Obi-Wan and Anakin exchanged a glance, then began to run. They would take their chances in the craters and hope to avoid the gundarks.

The cannonfire ripped the ground behind them as they ran. The air rolled into them with the shock of the blast. It was hard to stay on their feet as they dashed toward the deeper craters.

"Not that one!" Obi-Wan shouted as blaster cannonfire thundered past his ears. He recognized the prints of gundarks outside the crater.

Anakin veered. He was running fast, moving and weaving, but Obi-Wan picked up no communion with him, no Force connection. It was as though he were running with a stranger.

Anakin had lied to him. He knew that. Something had happened to him in that medical building. Did whatever it was

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

somehow prevent Anakin from telling Obi-Wan about it? Or was it Anakin's decision to hide something from him?

I don't know the answer to that. And that means I don't trust him. Not completely. Not anymore.

One of the security transports dived toward him. Dual laser cannons blasted. Obi-Wan jumped, but the impact of the explosion against the rocks threw him further into the air. The next thing he knew he was falling, blasted headlong, deep into the black hole of a crater...and a gundark nest.

Chapter Twelve

Obi-Wan landed on his sore shoulder inside the wall of the crater and ricocheted into midair again. He called on the Force to help him. He pictured a nest of gundarks at the end of his fall. He felt time slow down. He was able to pick out a clear landing site below.

He landed on a smooth stone floor and crashed up against a boulder, slamming his head. Relief coursed through him as well as pain. At least he had stopped in relative safety. There was no way to judge how big the crater was. He was more than a hundred meters into a pit left by an astroid thousands of years ago. He couldn't see through the black gloom. He could smell the gundarks, however, and hear them. They found the craters to be ideal nesting grounds, safe from other predators, and good bases from which to launch lethal attacks on their prey.

It was said that the cry of a gundark could freeze a being's blood. Obi-Wan didn't know about that, but the sound of them didn't make him feel very comfortable.

Gundarks had keen eyesight and good hearing. Their sense of smell was excellent. So far they had not realized an intruder was in their nest, but it was only a matter of time. He would have to use his cable launcher, and it would be a huge risk. The launcher would not reach high enough to get him completely out of

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

danger. The sides of the crater were hundreds of meters high. Climbing out would be a long process, and would bring him into close proximity with the creatures.

He looked around cautiously. Through the gray gloom he could see now that tucked into the sides of the crater were deep caves. That was the source of the gundarks' noise. They were nesting there.

He peered above. He wondered how Anakin was doing with those security droids. Had he found shelter?

The roar of gundarks suddenly echoed in the crater. Obi-Wan began to quietly move away from the sound. He knew that if he was discovered, he could not fight the gundarks alone, even with his lightsaber and the Force. There would be too many of them. He would need Anakin.

He couldn't risk a glowrod. He felt his way forward cautiously. If he could find some footholds in the wall, he could climb it. Climbing would be slower, but it would attract less attention. He would have to risk the journey.

A roar and the sound of a gundark rolling over made him freeze. He could smell the creature. Surely the creature could smell him. Obi-Wan didn't move. He tried not to sweat. The gundark snorted, then rolled over again. Obi-Wan realized it was asleep.

He moved carefully away. The ground was more uneven here. Several centimeters of fine dust covered some kind of rock shale. It was slippery and the rocks shifted under his weight. When a rock slithered and cracked, he held his breath.

Nothing. The gundarks roared again, but their roars had covered up the sound of his movement. And the one in the cave to his left was still sleeping.

Obi-Wan felt the side of the crater at last. He ran his hand along it. It was pockmarked with holes. Good. He should be able to climb it without the launcher.

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He put one foot in a cavity and tested it. Then he cautiously lifted himself up. So far, so good. He climbed up a few more meters.

He was balanced to take his next step when he felt a soft breath tickle his ear. Now he knew what it meant to have his blood freeze. He felt as though his veins were clogged with ice.

A baby gundark had snuggled into a deep cavity in the wall. It was sleeping only centimeters from him.

Just...don't...wake...it up....

He could not have been faced with a worse prospect. It was disaster to fall into a nest of treacherous beasts. It was a catastrophe to blunder into one of their young.

Holding his breath, Obi-Wan began to ease his way past.

RRRR4444WWWWKKK!

The roar split the air. The crater shook with the impact of a gundark's running footsteps. The young gundark awoke. *Rrrraaaaaawwww!*

Obi-Wan dropped the distance he'd traveled back to the floor. He ran. The gundark let out a scream and leaped up, heading straight to its young to ensure it was safe. Then it leaped down to deal with Obi-Wan.

The creature wasn't tall, but the strength of its four arms was immense. A common tactic was to grab prey by the claws of the massive arms that rose from the gundark's shoulders. Then the creature crushed the captured prey to death with the two slender arms that rose out of the muscled chest. The long, sharp claws could also rip a being to shreds. Of course, a gundark was also capable of simply tearing off the head of its prey with the large teeth that jutted out of its lower jaw. Once its bloodlust had been awakened, rare was the gundark that did not achieve its objective of rendering its victim into pieces of flesh and bone.

Obi-Wan was completely exposed, and he knew that caves were all around him. He couldn't hide. He drew his lightsaber even as he backed up but held it by his side, trying to show the creature he did not mean it harm.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

But gundarks were not known to be reasonable.

The attack was ferocious. The gundark made for him, all four arms reaching, trying to claw him. Huge teeth snapped and saliva poured out. Obi-Wan smelled heat and anger. He was forced to slash at the gundark as it came at him relentlessly, its howl filling the cavity of the crater.

He heard the thump of footsteps. More gundarks were approaching. Obi-Wan fumbled for his cable launcher. He'd have to risk it. He sent it flying above. It hit something. He tested the line. He activated the launch, but the gundark grabbed him with one claw and threw him back down on the floor. He felt the jolt in every bone. He rolled away as the creature swung down to finish him off. The gundark missed, scoring the rock with deep grooves.

Four more gundarks thundered into the space, snarling, ready for the kill. Obi-Wan felt his back hit the wall of the crater. Desperately, he looked above. He reached out to the Force even as he sent up a shout he knew had little chance of being heard.

“Anakin! Anakin, I need you!”

Chapter Thirteen

If Anakin had felt that there was a veil between him and his surroundings before, he was now beginning to feel breaks in that veil. There were moments of clarity, brief flashes, in which he knew he was seeing reality. During those moments he felt something deep within him, like a hook lodged in his heart, and he was glad to slip behind the veil again.

It was odd that he was able to achieve battle-mind, but he had. The movements were so ingrained in him that he leaped and twisted and ran without feeling the effort, much as he did when the Force was with him. He had taken down at least five security droids on STAPs, and maneuvered so that another two fired at each other. He still had three more STAPs to contend with, as well as the Vanqor guards on swoops. He was fighting as well as he ever had.

When Obi-Wan had been blasted into the crater, Anakin hadn't had more than a second to react. He assumed that his Master could handle whatever was down there. Obi-Wan could get out by himself.

Somewhere inside, Anakin knew this was a curious decision for him to make, one that he wouldn't have made normally. But it seemed logical, too. Obi-Wan was a Jedi, used to getting out of tight spots.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

Besides, Obi-Wan had always told him not to jump into things, to take his time. So why shouldn't he? His first priority was to take care of the droids and get the disk to Typha-Dor.

Anakin felt the veil slip again. It was happening more frequently now. He missed his calm. He wanted to be back in the garden. He didn't want to feel fear, or apprehension, or pain. He wanted to feel serene, as though nothing could touch him. He wanted it so badly.

Gundarks in the crater suddenly roared. Anakin fended off blaster rifle fire and drew closer to the crater. He thought he heard Obi-Wan calling him. The call came from within him, as though he heard it in his heart.

Something tugged at him. The hook that was buried so deep that he could barely feel it. He did not want to reach for it. He wanted it to lay buried.

Obi-Wan needed him.

But I needed him. And when he came, he asked for the disk. He did not come for me.

The pain this thought caused him to grab the remains of the veil. He wanted to wrap himself into its brand of unconsciousness.

I don't want to feel anymore!

Anakin leaped up and severed a droid in two that had the misfortune to pilot his STAP too close to the ground. Hunks of smoking metal clattered to the rocks below.

He realized what was wrong, what the essential conflict within him was. To be a Jedi was to follow his feelings. But if his feelings tortured him, what was he to do with them?

Grief.

Guilt.

Resentment.

Shame.

He had felt all of these things. Because of leaving his mother, because of Yaddle, because of Obi-Wan.

I don't want to feel!

Jude Watson

He struck out savagely at a STAP that had come in low, its lone droid pilot firing dual blaster rifles. He cut the droid's head off.

"Anakin!" He could hear Obi-Wan clearly now, his voice strained and desperate.

I don't want to feel!

The hook in his heart seared him, and he knew its name. It was love.

The love he felt for his Master was lodged firmly within him. It was a connection that had grown from the first moment Obi-Wan had told him that he would take him and train him.

He had learned one thing about love: It was besides the point. It didn't make anything smoother, or better. Most of the time, it just complicated things.

Why would he want to feel again, when feeling hurt so much?

Why would he want to remember Shmi with guilt as well as pleasure?

Why would he want to revisit his torment over the death of Yaddle?

Why would he want to take up the burden of caring what Obi-Wan thought or felt about him?

Because it's right.

Anakin groaned aloud. The thing he couldn't get away from, the certainty within him, the essential truth he had learned through all his training at the Temple, that was what he could see now. He knew what was right.

He ripped the veil and felt the Force flood in with all its power. He realized that the Zone of Self-Containment had not allowed him to access the Force except at the most basic level, and he hadn't even known it. Now he felt it grow.

Along with the Force he felt his emotions again. They came at him in a rush, as if they'd been held back and now were free to overflow. They bombarded him as cruelly as the laser cannons shooting above. He wanted to sink to his knees from the tide

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

washing over him, all the emotion he had suppressed and hoped never to feel again.

“Anakin!”

His Master’s cry filled him.

He stood, drawing the fire of the droids and guards. He began to run. Explosives shattered the rocks behind him. Two droids on STAPs dived, shooting both blaster rifles at him, trying to catch him between them.

Accessing the Force, he tumbled through the gap between them, allowing the power of the blast to catapult him in the direction of his Master’s voice, straight into the dark pit of the gundark nest.

Chapter Fourteen

One gundark had raked Obi-Wan's back with its claws. Another had thrown him against the wall. His left leg was going numb. He had killed one gundark, mortally wounded another...but would more come? He was weakening. He was losing. He was trapped in the dark with the roaring, ravenous beasts, and he had no doubt he would be torn limb from limb. They knew they had wounded him, and they were circling in for the kill.

If this was where he would become one with the Force, so be it. Yet he would fight to his last breath to prevent it. He would prefer a less gruesome end than this.

Obi-Wan thrust his lightsaber into a gundark's vulnerable neck. The blow made the gundark scream in agony and retreat. Obi-Wan whirled and retreated in turn as another bounded forward, its red eyes blazing with the scent of the kill.

Suddenly he felt the Force fill the cavernous space. A flash of light appeared overhead, and Obi-Wan heard a whistling noise. It was Anakin, leaping straight into the circle of gundarks, his lightsaber held in attack position.

When Obi-Wan had wondered if Anakin had abandoned him, he hadn't blamed him. He knew their mission demanded that

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

Anakin get to Typha-Dor. But it had hurt him to think his Padawan could leave him.

How could he have held such a thought? Anakin would never have abandoned him. Anakin would never betray him.

Anakin landed on a gundark's back. He plunged his lightsaber into the soft tissue at its neck. As the gundark thrashed, Anakin leaped down and, twisting to avoid a descending claw, slashed at the next gundark, cutting off two of its arms.

Anakin had given Obi-Wan time to take a breath. He was hampered by his leg and shoulder, but he was able to join Anakin, forcing the gundarks back toward the deep cave that had formed under the curve of the crater wall. Anakin took the lead, fighting brilliantly, his lightsaber moving to deflect as well as attack, his footwork always pressing the gundarks back while protecting Obi-Wan from another assault.

From another cave, three gundarks tried to outflank the Jedi. Anakin sensed them moments before Obi-Wan. The Padawan somersaulted into them, taking them off guard. While Obi-Wan dodged to draw the attention of the first group, he watched Anakin spring up amid the second group. One gundark lost a leg, another its sight. A third recoiled as Anakin slashed at its chest.

The gundarks piled back into the cave, howling and screaming from their wounds.

"Thanks for coming!" Obi-Wan shouted over the noise.

"Any time."

There was a flash to Anakin's gaze that he knew well. His eyes were bright.

Something has changed, Obi-Wan thought. *Anakin is back.*

"They haven't given up," Obi-Wan said. "They're waiting." He indicated his leg. "I can't climb very well."

Anakin activated his cable launcher. "Then let's go the easy way."

"There are gundarks nesting in the cave walls."

Jude Watson

"I saw them on my way down." Anakin wasn't troubled by the knowledge, that was clear. He grabbed Obi-Wan as if he weighed nothing and activated the cable.

They landed on a ledge that was free of a nest. Anakin activated the cable again.

"You planned the journey back as you came down," Obi-Wan said.

They landed again, and Anakin activated the other cable line. "Yes."

Obi-Wan marveled at that. It was what made Anakin a great Jedi. His battle mind was total and went everywhere. He saw every possibility, planned every move, and had even planned his escape.

They reached the surface and climbed over the lip of the crater. Obi-Wan took a deep breath, relieved to have left the horrifying nest.

He prepared to take cover when they emerged, but the sky was empty. He could see twisted metal and decimated droids scattered about.

"Did you get them all?"

"No, there were three STAPs left, plus two guards on swoops," Anakin said, tucking his cable launcher back into his belt. "I thought it was time to get you. I made it look as though a blast sent me into the crater. I imagine that when they saw me fall into the gundark nest, they thought I was done for."

"Most likely. No one survives a gundark nest." Obi-Wan looked around. "Now what? The only place to steal a transport is the camp. And I don't think breaking in will be as easy the next time." He looked over at the scattered remains of the exploded STAPs. "Can you make something out of those that will fly?"

Anakin surveyed the scraps of metal on the ground. "Are you serious? I couldn't even make a helmet out of it."

"How about fuel?"

"Possibly, but as you know, STAPs don't carry much."

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

“I left the swoop about twenty-five kilometers from here. We could refuel it.”

“We won’t get far,” Anakin said. “I say we head back to the camp. Maybe I can figure out the departure code so we don’t get blown up. How did you get into the camp, anyway?”

“You don’t want to know.” Obi-Wan groaned. He certainly wasn’t eager to hook himself onto a flying transport again.

Obi-Wan’s comlink signaled and, surprised, he answered it.

A familiar voice rang dryly in his ear. “Well, I’m here to rescue your sorry self once again. Honestly, I don’t know what you’d do without me.”

Obi-Wan grinned. “I think we found a ride,” he told Anakin.

Chapter Fifteen

They had only minutes to wait until two red-and-white Jedi cruisers landed a few meters away. Siri was the first to appear, striding down the landing ramp, her short blond hair glinting in the sun. “Need a lift?”

“If you insist,” Obi-Wan responded.

Obi-Wan and Siri had won their friendship through trials. They had always bantered and bickered. A deep respect lay underneath their light words, but it had taken some time for Anakin to see it.

Anakin was glad to see Siri, but seeing her meant he would have to see her Padawan, Ferus Olin. He wished that someone else—*anyone* else—had turned up to rescue them. The two of them had never gotten along, and things were worse between them since their mission on Andara, when Ferus had been abducted and Anakin had withheld the knowledge from Obi-Wan. Anakin felt he’d had good reasons, but neither Obi-Wan or Ferus had understood them.

Ferus emerged from the starship. Tall and erect, he greeted Obi-Wan and Anakin with a proper nod. “Master Kenobi. Anakin.”

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

"We're on another mission to the Xanlanner system," Siri said. "We got your distress signal. A couple of old friends of yours are ferrying me, Ferus, Ry-Gaul, and Tru Veld."

Anakin brightened. "Tru is here?" Tru Veld was his best friend. That would lighten the burden of seeing Ferus again.

He wondered if he would have felt this much pleasure if he had still been in the Zone of Self-Containment. He realized that the zone also blocked out feelings of intense happiness as well. He had paid a price for his serenity.

Obi-Wan suddenly moved toward the starship that Siri had emerged from. "I should have known!" he called. "That was such a wobbly landing!"

Anakin smiled. The landing had been perfect. But Obi-Wan was allowed to tease his oldest friend, Garen Muln. They had gone through Temple training together, just as Anakin and Tru had.

"You're one to talk about wobbling," Garen said, noting Obi-Wan's slight limp. There was concern underneath his words. "You look like you could use a medic."

"Maybe a touch of bacta," Obi-Wan admitted. "I tangled with a gundark or two."

"Ouch," Garen said. He laid a hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder. "Let's find the medpac."

Tru Veld bounded down the ramp of the other starship. His Master, Ry-Gaul, followed more slowly, his keen gray eyes surveying the landscape. Tru hurried up to Anakin, his silver eyes glinting. He was a Teevan, and had long, many-jointed arms and legs that caused him to walk like a rolling wave of water.

"Our paths cross, and it makes me glad," he said to Anakin.

"We're certainly glad to see you," Anakin said. "We have to get to Typha-Dor immediately."

Tru nodded. "That's why we're here."

"Who is that?" Anakin asked. He indicated a Jedi, a human woman with bright orange hair. She was compact and fit, and

Jude Watson

stood talking to Obi-Wan, Ry-Gaul, and Siri as Garen administered bacta to Obi-Wan's wound.

"That's Clee Rhara. She's an amazing pilot. She—"

"Once ran the pilot program for Jedi students," Anakin said. "She's a legend."

Clee Rhara walked over. "Anakin Skywalker. We meet at last." Her shrewd eyes studied him. "I was a good friend of Qui-Gon's. We were students together."

"I'm honored to meet you, Master Rhara," Anakin said.

"No time for pleasantries. Better get aboard. I hear we have to get to Typha-Dor." Clee Rhara grinned. "It's going to take some fancy flying. The Vanqor ships are everywhere. Something must be up."

"Something is definitely up," Anakin said. "An invasion."

"Then there's no time to waste, is there?"

Clee Rhara turned and strode back to her cruiser. The other Jedi also hurried on board. Obi-Wan beckoned to Anakin to board with him on Garen Muln's ship. Anakin was disappointed to have to say good-bye to Tru. Not to mention ride with Ferus instead.

Garen settled into the pilot seat. With a glance at Obi-Wan, he tilted his head toward Anakin, and Obi-Wan nodded. Pleased, Anakin took his place in the copilot's seat. He felt honored. Garen was possibly the best Jedi pilot in the Order, as good as Clee Rhara.

Garen flipped on the comm unit to speak to Clee. "So, do we have a strategy? Those Vanqors aren't too keen on ships violating their airspace."

"Sure," Clee Rhara answered. "Go really, really fast."

The two cruisers rose and streaked into the upper atmosphere at top speed.

"Set course for Typha-Dor," Garen said.

Siri sat at the nav console. She entered the destination coordinates. Anakin kept his eye on the radar.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

"Ships approaching," he said, giving the coordinates. "They look like patrols."

Four fast starfighters streaked across the sky.

"Piece of quinberry cake," Garen said.

Garen's hands were light on the controls. He climbed abruptly, the ship's nose straight up. Clee Rhara followed.

Garen headed straight for the two small red moons orbiting Vanqor. They orbited in tandem, and he dove for the space between them. He and Clee Rhara played hide-and-seek with the starfighters, who were unable to get a fix on their position.

"They're going to call for backup," Clee Rhara said. "I say it's time to outrun them."

"I'm right behind you. Let's go."

The two Jedi cruisers suddenly zoomed out from the protection of the moons' orbits. They streaked into the upper atmosphere. The Vanqor starfighters gave chase. Cannonfire boomed behind them, but they were able to outrun it. Garen and Clee Rhara maintained a zigzagging course, avoiding the occasional proton torpedo.

"We've got some kind of military ship ahead," Siri called. "Ten escort starfighters."

"Just a piece of juja-cake," Garen said.

"Three minutes until we can make the jump to hyperspace," Siri said.

Ahead of them, Clee Rhara dived as the enemy ship's huge weapons began to pound. Garen peeled off to the left. For the next three minutes, Anakin watched in awe as Garen slid the cruiser through, in, and around cannonfire without disturbing the gleaming red paint of his ship or even firing his own weapons.

Garen noted Anakin's interest. "I always prefer evasion to confrontation," he said with a grin.

The ship shot into hyperspace in a shower of stars. Everyone settled back.

"Typha-Dor in two hours," Siri said.

"Piece of sweet cake," Garen said, satisfied.

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They came out of hyperspace beyond Typha-Dor's atmosphere. Anakin immediately checked the radar.

"No pursuit ships."

"I don't think Vanqor would risk violating Typha-Dor airspace," Obi-Wan said. "Not until the invasion, anyway."

"We'll be landing in a few minutes," Garen said.

Garen guided the ship to a graceful slot in a large landing pad that lay at the space center midway between the two capital cities, Sarus-Dor and Ith-Dor. The Jedi were greeted by a security officer.

"May I ask your business—"

"We need to see the rulers of Typha-Dor immediately," Obi-Wan said. "We have vital information."

"The rulers of Typha-Dor are not easily seen—"

"We are Jedi envoys on a diplomatic mission from the Galactic Senate. We have information about an invasion," Obi-Wan rapped out impatiently.

"But...the invasion has already begun," the security officer said.

At first the officer refused to yield, but the combined insistence of eight Jedi was too much for him and his staff. The Jedi were ushered into the strategic planning meeting of the High Council at the space center.

The generals and the two rulers of Typha-Dor and their aides stood around a circular holomap. Blinking colored lights showed possible ship movements and attack points. Obi-Wan knew the two rulers as Talus, a young man, and Binalu, an older woman who had ruled Typha-Dor for many years. They had called for the Jedi originally and nodded politely at them.

"Sorry you were delayed," Binalu said graciously.

Binalu had stepped aside. Now Obi-Wan could see Mezdec in the middle of the group. When he saw Obi-Wan and Anakin, he paled.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

"This is a high-security meeting," he said. "You have no clearance."

"Mezdec, these are Jedi," Binalu said. "We asked the Senate for help."

Obi-Wan gave Mezdec a cool glance, then ignored him. He glanced at the strategy map. He saw that the Typha-Dor had massed all their weaponry and their fleet to the south.

He and Anakin had studied the invasion plans during the flight. Shalini had been right. Mezdec had given the generals false plans. They were massing troops and ships to meet an invasion that would not arrive. Meanwhile, the Vanqors would take over the capital cities in one thrust, unopposed.

"I have met Mezdec before. We were the team that was sent to rescue the crew at the outpost," Obi-Wan said. "Have you moved your ships to attack?" he asked the generals.

"We are moving them now," one of the generals said grudgingly, as though she saw no reason to tell the Jedi. "The Vanqors will attack our factories in the south."

"Is it too late to recall them?"

"Why should we?" the general answered. "With all due respect to the Jedi, we did ask for your help, and we are grateful for your response. But we can handle this. We are going to surprise the Vanqors when they invade our airspace."

"You, generals, will be the ones who will be surprised," Obi-Wan said.

"That is not the true invasion plan," Anakin said. He set Shalini's holofile spinning. It unfolded in pulses of light, showing detail after detail of the Vanqor invasion. "This is the real invasion plan. If you mass your forces there, the Vanqors will simply sail in and take over without a fight."

"But the Vanqors have already sent their ships," Binalu said, indicating the map.

"I see evidence of only two destroyers in the south," Obi-Wan said.

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“Mezdec explained that more are coming. The crew intercepted the Vanqor invasion plans,” a general said. She was tall and imposing, with multicolored medals on her shoulders. “He came to me personally. I am the high general of Typha-Dor, General Bycha.”

“That’s right,” Mezdec said. “We have the plans. I was the only one to make it out alive.”

“On the contrary,” Obi-Wan said. “The others made it out, too. You’ll be sorry to hear that, Mezdec.”

“Mezdec is a spy, General Bycha,” Anakin said. “I suggest you give an order for his immediate arrest.”

The generals exchanged glances. Talus and Binalu looked at the Jedi.

“This is a grave charge,” Talus said.

“They are lying!” Mezdec cried.

“You must trust us,” Obi-Wan said. “The fate of your world lies in your hands. The Vanqors are not going to attack your factories. They are moving to attack the twin capital cities. Can you move the fleet to these positions?” He took a laser pointer from a general and indicated the map. “Look. The Vanqors are invading through this corridor. I’ve studied the star charts. Your moons will align to give them cover, but it will also create a window for you to attack. You can trap the majority of the fleet between the two moons. Even with a smaller force, you could defeat them. They will be vulnerable right here.”

The generals looked at the map. They looked at each other.

“Don’t listen to them!” Mezdec cried again. “They are lying!”

Slowly, General Bycha turned to him. “And what reason would the Jedi have for lying?” She held Mezdec’s gaze. “I hereby issue an order for Mezdec’s immediate arrest.”

Then General Bycha turned back to the Jedi. “We don’t have much time,” she said.

Chapter Sixteen

Mezdec was taken away. The room exploded into activity. Obi-Wan was impressed with how quickly the generals grasped the situation and formulated a response. The fleet sped to the other side of Typha-Dor and lurked behind the string of moons, effectively concealing themselves and ready to attack.

General Bycha spoke to the Jedi. “We were unprepared for war. Our planet has no planetary defensive shield, and only one planetary turbolaser. It’s all up to our fleet.”

“You have the strategic advantage,” Siri said.

“Which means there is another option,” Obi-Wan pointed out. “Within seconds of the Vanqors invading your airspace, you will be able to surprise and surround them. They know their entire fleet can easily be destroyed. It is a perfect opportunity for you to force a surrender without losing lives.”

General Bycha looked interested. “Most generals are primed to fight. I will do so if necessary. But on Typha-Dor we always seek to avoid conflict if we can.”

“A truce would make sense for Vanqor as well as Typha-Dor,” Obi-Wan pointed out. “Typha-Dor has vast resources. Vanqor has factories and technical innovations. The other planets in your system each have something unique to contribute. If there was a strong alliance between your planets, you would all

Jude Watson

be interdependent. You would learn and profit from one another.”

“You could become one of the strongest systems in the galaxy and a boon to the Republic,” Siri said.

Binalu shook her head. “But we don’t trust the Vanqors. How could we, after what they have done?”

“Alliances are rarely built on trust,” Clee Rhara said. “They are built on mutual advantage.”

“One of your conditions would have to be complete disarmament,” Garen said. “Vanqor might choose that rather than complete annihilation.”

“It all depends on you,” Obi-Wan said. “You have the advantage of surprise. When you don’t fire on the Vanqors, they might hesitate to fire on you. You’ll need to speak to the ruler of Vanqor and explain that you have his fleet surrounded. The Vanqor fleet captains will confirm. You have a chance to win a war without a battle.”

Binalu and Talus gazed at the blinking lights on the holomap, each representing a ship with hundreds of lives aboard. They had a wordless communication with each other, then nodded.

“Tell the fleet to get into position but not to fire a shot unless ordered,” Talus said.

“We will talk to Van-Ith, the ruler of Vanqor,” Binalu said.

It was a tense time in the operations room. The generals, the Jedi, and the rulers watched the blinking lights on the map. They saw the Vanqor fleet approach. At the last possible moment, General Bycha gave the order for the Typha-Dor coalition forces to surround the Vanqor fleet. The movement was executed perfectly.

“Arrange for a comm transmission to the head of the fleet,” General Bycha ordered.

While General Bycha spoke to the Vanqor captains, Binalu and Talus spoke to the Vanqor leader. The Jedi watched and

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

waited. After a long negotiation, the Vanqors agreed to surrender and enter peace talks.

The Vanqor fleet slowly followed the Typha-Dor escorts to the surface of Typha-Dor, where they would remain for the duration of the talks.

"This will take some time to accomplish," Talus said to the Jedi. "Thank you for your help. We are in your debt."

"Shalini and her crew were responsible for obtaining the invasion plans," Obi-Wan told them. "They risked their lives. They entrusted the disk to us while they were interred in a prisoner-of-war camp."

"Are they in danger?" General Bycha asked.

"Anakin was also a prisoner," Obi-Wan said. "There's a camp in the Tomo Crater region on Vanqor."

General Bycha focused her intense gaze on Anakin. "We've heard of this camp. Rumors have reached us of medical experiments being performed on prisoners. This is against Republic law. If we knew this for certain, it would help us in negotiations with the Vanqors. Did you see anything like that?"

Obi-Wan saw Anakin hesitate. Why? What had happened to him? Why hadn't he told Obi-Wan? He'd had plenty of opportunity aboard Garen's ship.

"I underwent the procedure," Anakin said. "It is called the Zone of Self-Containment."

He saw the Jedi turn and look at him. Ferus's gaze was sharp. He had seen that Obi-Wan hadn't known this.

"What happens to you?" General Bycha asked.

"You become...content," Anakin said. "You have complete mobility and your thought processes are sharp. It doesn't feel as though you're drugged. But the things that normally torment you don't bother you at all."

"Crowd control," General Bycha said. "It's a way to subdue populations. I can't believe we must form a partnership with those who would do this."

Jude Watson

"The partnership will ensure that they won't," Clee Rhara said.

"How was the substance administered?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I don't know," Anakin said. "That was the strange thing. We weren't injected. And we ate with the med care workers and personnel, fed from a communal pot. Our water source was the same as theirs, too."

"It is possible they were all drugged," General Bycha said.

"I don't think so," Anakin said. "I felt that they were...envious of the prisoners."

"When did you first feel the effects?" Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin thought back. "They gave us a paralyzing drug, but that didn't make a difference to my mind. It was after a bath."

"It was transmitted through water," Obi-Wan said.

"That is a very difficult way to transmit a drug," General Bycha said. "Water transmission hasn't been perfected." He frowned. "These are dark days. There are too many scientists with no scruples, willing to poison bodies and minds."

Obi-Wan suddenly leaned forward toward Anakin. "Did you ever see the doctor in charge?"

"Yes," Anakin said. "I was brought to her because in the beginning I was able to resist the paralyzing drug somewhat, with the help of the Force."

"Do you know her name?"

Anakin thought back. "She never told me." Odd. He hadn't noticed that at the time.

"Do you remember what she looked like?"

"A woman in late mid-life," Anakin said. "Light-colored hair. Distinctive green eyes. She had a strong face." He thought back. "The strange thing was that she guessed that I was Force-sensitive. She seemed to know a great deal about the Force."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes. "Jenna Zan Arbor," he said.

Clee Rhara, Ry-Gaul, and Garen looked at him in surprise.

"She is on a prison planet," Clee Rhara said.

"So we thought," Obi-Wan said.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

“Who is she, Master?” Anakin asked.

“Someone who has hurt the Jedi and the Republic in the past,” Obi-Wan said. “She kept Qui-Gon prisoner in order to study the Force. She was a brilliant scientist who began her career after she found cures to several plagues and saved whole planets. But then she grew corrupt. She began to introduce plagues or viruses so that she would be hired to cure the populations. She was adept at using water systems or air systems. She made a great fortune. But the Jedi caught her in the end.” Obi-Wan turned to General Bycha. “May I use your database?”

General Bycha showed him to the console. Obi-Wan did a quick check of the prison world he knew Zan Arbor had been exiled to.

He whirled around in his chair. “Escaped. She is now a wanted criminal.” He stood. “We must get to the Tomo Crater Camp right away.”

“You will meet resistance,” General Bycha warned him. “The surrender is not complete.”

Obi-Wan looked at Clee Rhara, Garen, Siri, and Ry-Gaul, a question in his eyes.

Ry-Gaul nodded. “We are at your service, Obi-Wan.”

Chapter Seventeen

After receiving clearance from the Senate for their operation, they flew to Vanqor. They met no resistance from the Vanqor ships. The Jedi cruiser flew over the rugged landscape of the Tomo Craters, and then the camp appeared ahead. Then resistance exploded in the form of laser-cannonfire. Apparently General Bycha had not underestimated the resistance they would meet on the ground.

Garen dived and twisted, piloting the ship expertly through the fire, never wavering from his destination.

They landed amid heavy fire and charged out, lightsabers at the ready. The security droids were taken care of with quick thrusts and backhanded swipes. The Vanqor guards were armed with blaster rifles, wrist rockets, and stun batons. The Jedi advanced as a solid flank that broke and re-formed as they leaped and twisted, using their lightsabers and occasionally Force-pushing a Vanqor guard who decided today was his day to seek glory. Instead he ended up with a throbbing skull as he was thrown against a wall.

It was at times such as these that Anakin felt something close to what he'd felt in the Zone of Self-Containment. It was not that he enjoyed battle. Battle was a necessity to an end. It was that battle filled his mind in a way that other things could not.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

Focus was absolute. He felt in the midst of the Force. With the other Jedi around him, the Force was especially powerful. It made every decision easy, every move fluid.

He even felt a kinship with Ferus. He did not want to be Ferus's friend, but he was glad to have him at his side during a battle. Ferus was known for his strength and agility. His moves were flawless. Yet he did not fight only for himself, but cast his battle mind like a net, ready to respond to the others if they needed him. When four sentry droids bore down on Anakin, it was Ferus who leaped, smashing two of them to the ground with one stroke.

Soon the droids had been reduced to scrap and the Vanqor guards decided that facing a squad of Jedi had not been in their job descriptions. They threw down their weapons and surrendered.

"Zan Arbor," Obi-Wan said to Anakin.

"We'll free the prisoners," Siri said. "You might meet more resistance there. Ferus, go with them."

The three Jedi raced to the medical building where Anakin had been held. No ships had taken off since they arrived. No doubt Zan Arbor had heard the battle. She could be hiding. Or she could decide to make a last stand. Anakin was prepared for anything.

The halls were empty. Doors were flung open, and there were signs of disarray in the trailing linens on the sleep couches and the discarded food on trays. The warming lights in the courtyard had been turned off, and the leaves looked shrunken and yellowed. It appeared that the entire operation had been hastily abandoned.

Anakin led the way to Zan Arbor's office. They did not need to break in. The door was wide open. Drawers hung open, empty. Her desk had been cleared. Even her septsilk curtains had been taken down.

Anakin felt relief move through him. But why? He wasn't sure. He only knew that he did not want to face Zan Arbor again.

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Especially not in front of his Master. It was as though she held a secret to a part of him he did not want to share.

When he turned, he saw that Ferus had seen his relief. Anakin hid his exasperation. No matter where he turned, Ferus was there, eager to see what Anakin wanted to conceal. Ferus's ability to tune in to his fellow Jedi might have been helpful in battle, but Anakin found it deeply annoying at other times.

"Too late," Anakin said to Obi-Wan. "She must have heard about the thwarted invasion."

"She couldn't have hidden all the evidence," Obi-Wan said. "We'll need to back up what happened here. It will add to her crimes."

Obi-Wan surveyed the hastily departed office. "I know one thing, Padawan. We have just discovered our next mission. We have to find Jenna Zan Arbor."

Chapter Eighteen

The Jedi stood on the landing platform in the capital city of Sarus-Dor. The Typha-Dors had loaned a gleaming Gen-6 starship to Obi-Wan and Anakin, who were heading out on the trail of Zan Arbor. Garen and Clee Rhara had readied their transports to resume their interrupted mission.

Anakin leaned against the wall with Tru. He felt weariness deep in his bones, but he was anxious to get moving, eager to leave this mission behind as a memory.

If only he weren't heading to find Jenna Zan Arbor. Anakin wasn't afraid of the scientist, but he wasn't eager to tangle again with someone who could put him in the Zone of Self-Containment.

"It's got to be draining, no matter what the medic said," Tru said. "That's probably why."

Anakin smiled faintly. "Why what?" Tru had a habit of speaking his thoughts out loud, usually right in the middle of them.

"Why you look tired. The medic said he found no side effects, so I wouldn't worry about that." Tru peered at him sympathetically.

"I'm not worried," Anakin said. He paused. "Do you ever wonder about detachment, Tru?"

Jude Watson

One of the reasons Tru was his friend was that he didn't have to explain things to him. "Of course. It is the hardest Jedi lesson," Tru said. "I wonder about it all the time. How can we follow our feelings and yet be detached? Master Ry-Gaul says that feeling deeply is necessary for all living beings. It is how we use those feelings that is crucial. If we let them determine our actions, we can go astray."

"I guess I still don't know how to free myself," Anakin said.

"Me neither. I guess that's why we're Padawans, and they're Masters," Tru said. "The thing is not to worry."

"Yes," Anakin said. "That's the thing." He noticed Ferus looking over at them. Ferus quickly looked away.

"What's the matter with Ferus?" Anakin asked.

Tru looked uncomfortable. "Nothing."

"Tell me. He's barely said a word to me. Not that I mind."

Tru shifted his weight. "He said...well. He wondered why you didn't tell your Master that you'd undergone that treatment. It was clear that you hadn't. We all wondered. After all, it is strange."

Anakin looked over at Ferus, who had joined Siri, who was saying good-bye to Obi-Wan. "He always gets in my business."

"He only said out loud what we all thought," Tru said with his usual honesty. "I bet Obi-Wan is thinking it, too."

"I'm not sure why I didn't tell him," Anakin said. "I was going to tell him. Did something ever happen to you that you wanted to think about first, before you told anyone?"

"No," Tru said. "I guess I like to talk."

Anakin laughed. Tru was always truthful. Anakin could see through him like water. That was how clear he was. And the only thing he saw was goodness.

Ferus came up. "It's time to board," he told Tru.

"I hear you're wondering why I didn't tell Obi-Wan about what happened at the prison camp," Anakin said in a challenging tone.

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

Ferus gazed at him. "Yes, I did wonder," he said. "But then I figured it out."

"Oh, really? Why don't you enlighten us?" Anakin suggested.

"You were afraid to tell Obi-Wan because you enjoyed it," he said. "You enjoyed feeling nothing. It even overcame your loyalty."

"Nothing overcomes Anakin's loyalty to his Master, Ferus," Tru said sharply. "And it is none of your business, anyway. You weren't there. You don't know what happened. You have no right to judge."

Ferus seemed to struggle against Tru's words for a moment. Then he inclined his head. "You're right, Tru, as always. I apologize, Anakin. I shouldn't have said it."

That's right, Ferus. You stepped over the line. But maybe Anakin owed him one, after their mission on Andara.

"All right," Anakin said. He noted that Ferus hadn't said he was wrong. Just that he shouldn't have said it.

"Good-bye," Ferus said. "May the Force be with you."

Anakin merely nodded a cool farewell.

"Ferus is the perfect Padawan, remember?" Tru said as Ferus boarded the ship, trying to make Anakin feel better. "He feels like he has to correct all of us."

"Thank you for defending me," Anakin said. "I will miss you, friend."

"Take care, Anakin," Tru said. "Take *care*."

Tru walked away. Anakin felt a tiny sting at Tru's words. He hadn't meant them as an affectionate farewell. He'd meant them as a warning.

Obi-Wan waited as Garen and Siri walked up the ramp. It slid shut. Obi-Wan backed up a few steps to watch the two ships take off. Then he walked slowly to Anakin's side. They watched until the two ships were just red slivers in the sky, bits of light. Then they shot to maximum speed and disappeared.

"You said torment," Obi-Wan remarked, still looking at the sky.

Jude Watson

"Excuse me?" Anakin pretended confusion, but he knew exactly what Obi-Wan was referring to.

"You said, *'The things that normally torment you don't bother you at all.'* Not the things that trouble you, but *torment* you." Obi-Wan turned to face him. "It was a strong word. What torments you, Anakin?"

He looked at the ground. "Perhaps I spoke more strongly than I meant to."

"That is not an answer."

"Sometimes I don't want to be the Chosen One," Anakin said. The words broke free. They felt like stones in his mouth.

"That's not surprising," Obi-Wan said. "Many gifts can be burdens."

"The Force is so strong. I can feel it so much. I *feel* so much. I *don't want to feel so much!*" Anakin hardly recognized his voice, choked and aching. Obi-Wan looked startled at his vehemence. "Why am I chosen? Why is it me? Can't I refuse it? Can't you let me refuse it? *Can't you take it away?*"

"Anakin—"

"Take it from me. Please, Master." Anakin wanted to fall to his knees. A deep tide of feeling, of dread, had risen up within him and choked him. He felt tears in the back of his throat. Even his friend Tru was afraid for him. Just as Ferus was. Just as his own Master was, the person who knew him the best.

What do they see that I cannot?

The sudden panic shocked him. It had sprung up so abruptly. He hadn't meant to say what he had said. He hadn't even known he had been feeling it. Now it felt like the truest thing he had ever said. The dread was always there. He lived with it, but he didn't understand it. He just wanted it to go away.

The depth of Obi-Wan's shock and compassion showed in his eyes, in the way he gently placed his hands on Anakin's shoulders. "My Padawan. I would do anything for you. I would bear your burdens for you if I could. But I cannot."

STAR WARS: The Moment of Truth

Anakin bowed his head. The panic and fear whirled inside him, and he was ashamed.

Obi-Wan bent closer to speak softly. He did not release his grip on Anakin's shoulders. "But I will help you. I will always help you. I will not leave you."

The words reverberated like a bell. Obi-Wan's touch brought Anakin back to himself. He raised his head.

"Things between us have not run smoothly lately," Obi-Wan said. "But you must never doubt my commitment to you."

"And mine to you," Anakin said.

The breeze rose and stirred their robes. It smelled fresh and clean. It was morning, and they had things to accomplish, a journey to make.

They turned, and together, they walked to the ship. Anakin looked ahead to the next mission, and the fear returned. Obi-Wan was bringing him straight to the creator of the process that had caused him so much doubt and panic. His fear suddenly freshened and sharpened. Now it was a certainty that this next mission would bring him too close to a truth he didn't want to face.

Book Eight

The Changing of the Guard

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BY JUDE WATSON

THE CHANGING OF THE GUARD



Chapter One

Senate aide Tyro Caladian winced at the look of frustration on the face of his friend Obi-Wan Kenobi. “I’m sorry,” he said for the third time. “There is nothing I can do.”

Obi-Wan wanted to groan. He wanted to kick a hole through the rare lagoon wood paneling of Meeting Room A3000291 in the Senate. He wanted to react like a privileged, arrogant Senator used to getting his way. He wanted to lash out.

But he was a Jedi. Jedi did not do such things. They accepted even the most nerve-torturing frustrations with calm focus and unswerving direction. He must look for the flaw in the logic, discover the opening in the locked gate. Find the way. Petty emotions would only divert him. Obi-Wan took a deep breath and searched for his calm center.

He looked over at his apprentice, Anakin Skywalker. If Obi-Wan merely *felt* like kicking a wall, it appeared that Anakin would do so at any moment. His gaze was turbulent, boiling. Then, as Obi-Wan watched, a mask slid over Anakin’s frustration. He looked composed now, perfectly in control.

An impressive achievement. Obi-Wan had noted Anakin’s growth over the past six months while they had been tracking the evil scientist Jenna Zan Arbor from her last known stop in the

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Vanqor system. Anakin was seventeen now. He was becoming a man as well as a Jedi.

Together they had followed Zan Arbor's trail, tracing rumors and finding clues. They knew the scientist did not have access to her large fortune, which the Senate had confiscated and then dispersed among the many planets she had wronged. They knew what the Vanqors had paid her would soon be depleted. But they also knew that she had a taste for extravagance. She liked to live well. Perhaps she would leave a trail that way.

Obi-Wan and Anakin had found other missions along the way, places where they were needed that couldn't be ignored. Still they continued to search the galaxy for clues to Zan Arbor's whereabouts, occasionally diverted but never deflected from their goal.

The big break came when Anakin discovered she had bought a limited-production cruiser called a Luxe Flightwing. The ship was so rare and beautiful that everyone remembered it—fuelers on obscure spaceports, repair personnel in busy capital cities, customs officials, and especially other pilots. It had been an unwise move, typical of her greed and arrogance. She wanted what she wanted, then she acquired it. But it was a bad mistake. Bit by bit, information trickled in, and at last they had tracked her to Romin, a small planet in the Mid-Rim.

Before traveling there to arrest her, Obi-Wan asked his friend and fellow Jedi, Siri Tachi, to help. Siri and her Padawan, Ferus Olin, had been involved in the search from time to time but had been called on by the Jedi Council for other missions. Still, Siri had pledged her support to Obi-Wan. Whenever he needed her for the final capture of Zan Arbor, she would be there.

Now in Meeting Room A3000291, Siri didn't show her frustration, but he sensed it in the taut lines of her muscled body. Obi-Wan knew all too well how Siri despised having to deal with the bureaucracy of the Senate. She was always geared for action. In many ways, she was like Anakin.

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

“Look,” she said to Tyro, “we’re not stupid. We know it will be tricky. Romin is ruled by Roy Teda, who by all accounts is an evil dictator. It’s not like he’s going to invite the Jedi in. But the Senate is committed to arresting Zan Arbor. Why won’t they give us permission to go in?”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Tyro said. Clearly uncomfortable under the scrutiny of Siri’s blazing blue eyes, the Svivreni fiddled with the thick metal clasp that held his long black hair in a plume that ran down his back. Then he smoothed the glossy fur on his small, pointed face. “Senate procedure always is. Teda himself is in violation of several galactic laws. He imprisons without trial. We are certain he uses torture to extract information. He has shut down the information bureaus and controls the only communications system on the planet. He has even raided his planet’s treasury for his own personal use.”

“Exactly,” Siri said impatiently. “He is a criminal. So why do we have to listen to him?”

“Because he is a duly elected ruler,” Tyro said.

“But he rigged the elections!” Anakin burst out.

“That makes no difference,” Tyro answered. “We must still obey the laws of Romin. And there is a law forbidding any bounty hunters to enter.”

“We are not bounty hunters,” Ferus said. His dignity rang through his words. “We are Jedi.”

Tyro swallowed. “Yes,” he said, “but the law says that *no one* can arrest or transport a galactic criminal off Romin. And that’s what you mean to do. Teda has made himself wealthy by offering his planet as a refuge to the most-wanted criminals. They’re happy to pay him a hefty bribe in order to relocate to his planet. In return, he makes sure that any bounty hunters are forcibly expelled. If his security police find them, they are made to ‘disappear.’”

“Then we’ll just go to Romin without Senate approval,” Anakin said.

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Ferus frowned. Obi-Wan noted how Anakin bristled when he saw it. The two had never gotten along, and Obi-Wan wasn't surprised. Ferus followed the rules. Anakin had no hesitation about bending them to get a job done.

"Ah," Tyro said carefully, "I'm afraid that you *do* need approval. Without legitimate cause, you will be asked to leave the planet. And if you do not leave, it is likely you will be imprisoned—if you are lucky. Teda has been known to execute without trial."

"But the Senate cannot shield a criminal like Zan Arbor!" Obi-Wan leaped to his feet and began to pace out his frustration. Now he knew why Zan Arbor had risked buying such a showpiece transport. She didn't care, because she knew she would be protected. That infuriated him. No one was above galactic law. "There has to be a way."

Tyro shook his head. "If there is, I can't think of it. The Senate looks the other way when it comes to Romin. The Romin Senator wields great influence. He is a favorite of Sano Sauro—who as you well know is the leader of a large voting bloc."

Obi-Wan groaned. "Not him again." He had tangled with Sano Sauro before.

"If you land on Romin secretly, you will be in violation of Senate laws," Tyro said. "And I assure you, the Senator from Romin will not hesitate to prosecute even a Jedi," Tyro spoke softly. "I'm afraid this is typical of the Senate these days. I am so sorry, my good friend Obi-Wan, that I cannot help you."

"I am grateful for what you've done," Obi-Wan said woodenly. He refused to accept that Zan Arbor was untouchable. As his Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, had said, *There is always another way*.

Tyro sighed. "I come from a peaceful world. The growing lawlessness in the galaxy troubles me greatly. The prison worlds are not well maintained. Just recently there was yet another escape from a high-security prison, the Greylands Security Complex on Tentator. It was a notorious gang who broke free.

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

Luckily the gang members were tracked and apprehended just hours ago. But such successes are rare, I must admit.”

Obi-Wan stopped pacing and fixed Tyro with a keen gaze. “Who are they?”

“They are called the Slams,” Tyro said.

“Species?”

“Humanoid. From Mamendin, in the Core. They started there with con jobs, ID thefts, things like that. Then they roamed the galaxy, mostly in the Core, pulling scams. They were the gang who heisted the entire treasury of Vuma. The leaders are fairly young—a man named Slam and a woman named Valadon. Slam is a con man and Valadon is an ID theft expert. They have only two other members—they keep their numbers small to maintain loyalty. The Slams were caught when they tried to break into a security vault of the Commerce Guild. You just don’t go after the Commerce Guild without major consequences.”

“I remember the Vuma affair,” Siri said. “We heard about it at the Temple. It just about bankrupted the planet. The crystalline vertex they stole is still missing.” She gave Obi-Wan a curious glance. “What is it? You’ve got that look on your face.”

“What look?”

“That look that says, *You’re going to hate this idea, Siri, but I’m going to do it anyway*,” Siri said dryly.

Obi-Wan grinned. “Relax. You’re going to love it.”

Chapter Two

Anakin looked over at his Master. They had grown even closer over the past months. Anakin had broken down after the mission on Vanqor and confessed his fears to Obi-Wan. He had been afraid to tell his Master how there were times he no longer wanted to be the Chosen One. He realized that he had been walking around with a nameless dread in his heart. He didn't know what he feared, but he knew that he lived with the fear every waking moment. Saying this out loud had shocked his Master, but it had freed Anakin in a way he still didn't understand.

Perhaps it had been his experiences in the prisoner-of-war camp on Vanqor that had caused him to unburden his heart to Obi-Wan. Whatever the reason had been, it had changed something between them. They had grown closer. They were truly Master and Padawan now.

He knew what had happened was a classic step in the Master–Padawan relationship. *The apprentice invites the Master, and it begins.* As learners, they had all wondered what the expression meant. The Master was the one to invite a Jedi student to be his or her apprentice. That was how it started. So what was the meaning of *The apprentice invites the Master?*

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

Now he understood. He had been Obi-Wan's apprentice for years before he had truly trusted him with the inner workings of his heart and mind. Once he had invited Obi-Wan to share his deepest fears, his worst nightmares, their relationship had shifted and deepened. It was as though they were starting again. *It begins.* Obi-Wan had told him that the same thing had happened with him and Qui-Gon. "In the middle of our journey together, we began again," he'd told Anakin.

It was mysterious and wonderful. They knew what each other would do before it was done. They knew what was in each other's thoughts. Whereas before Anakin would worry about what was on Obi-Wan's mind, now he accepted that some things he knew, and some things he didn't, and that many things on Obi-Wan's mind had nothing to do with him.

He could not read Obi-Wan's thoughts right now. He had no idea what his Master was planning. He felt just as puzzled as Siri. But where Siri felt worried, Anakin felt excited.

Siri raised an eyebrow. "I'm listening."

"We have a way to land on Romin and get to Jenna Zan Arbor, then get her off-planet without violating any Senate regulations or the laws of Romin," Obi-Wan said. "Technically."

"Technically?" Tyro asked.

"We enter legally," Obi-Wan said. "As criminals."

Siri sat down and slung one ankle over her knee. "Well, that's a relief. For a minute there, I thought you actually had a plan that made sense."

"We take on the identities of the Slam gang," Obi-Wan said. "I'll be Slam, you'll be Valadon. Anakin and Ferus can be the other two."

"Waldo and Ukiah," Tyro supplied. "But technically—"

"So, we land on Romin and find Zan Arbor," Siri said. "What next?"

"Well, I haven't planned it out completely," Obi-Wan said. "We find a way to lure her off-planet. That can't be too hard."

Jude Watson

“Sure,” Siri said. “One of the shrewdest scientific minds in the galaxy is going for a joyride with us. As Garen would say, piece of sweetcake.”

“We’ll think of something to tempt her to join us,” Obi-Wan said. “The point is to land on Romin and contact her. We can only do that as criminals.”

“Can I return to ‘technically?’” Tyro asked. “Technically, you’d still be in violation of several laws I can easily think of. If you get caught.”

“We’re not going to be caught. That’s where you come in,” Obi-Wan said, turning to him.

Suddenly, Tyro looked uneasy. “Oh.”

“We’ll need ID docs and descriptions and background information,” Obi-Wan said. “And you said they operated on different planets in the Core. That means they probably have a spaceworthy ship. Do you think you can pull some strings for us and commandeer it?”

“I don’t know,” Tyro said doubtfully. “That would take some favor trading.”

“Your specialty,” Obi-Wan pointed out.

“It would all have to be top secret, so I’d have to go to the Senate security committee first,” Tyro said slowly. “They’d have to give me a waiver to approach the Overseer of Prison Worlds, who would have to issue an edict to the prison world’s Confiscation Authority....”

“I don’t need the details, Tyro,” Obi-Wan said. “I just need results. We’ll also need time. You’ll have to get the authorities to agree to keep the capture of the Slam gang a secret until we’ve completed the mission. They have to still be listed as escaped, in case anyone checks.”

Tyro frowned. “That might be difficult. When they catch criminals, they like to boast about it. I’d need an indefinite Stop Comm order from the Central Posting Service—” Tyro caught Obi-Wan’s eyes. He shut his datapad briskly and rose. “I’d better get started.”

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

Tyro hurried out of the room.

“We’ll have to clear this with Master Windu,” Siri said. “And I’d bet it will take some persuasion.”

“He’ll agree,” Obi-Wan said confidently. “He knows how important the capture of Zan Arbor is to the safety of the galaxy.”

Anakin felt a surge of excitement as Obi-Wan and Siri began to discuss possible courses of action and how soon they could leave. The frustration of locating Zan Arbor but not being able to take her into custody was over. Now they had a focus. They had a way to apprehend her.

He pushed away the thought of seeing her again. Anakin had focused his attention on catching her. He had not thought about what he would do when they found her. He had met Jenna Zan Arbor in the prisoner-of-war camp on Vanqor. She had been pleasant, polite. Yet the memory of what happened there chilled him. She was the inventor of a drug that induced what she called the Zone of Self-Containment. Anakin had felt pleasure and contentment while under its influence. Nothing had bothered him. For the first time in his life, he had felt at peace. It was the feeling he had hoped to achieve as a Jedi. What had scared him was the thought that he would never feel that again. He had achieved true serenity in the Zone, but it had been a cheap victory, for after it was over, it had left him with guilt and fear. The very emotions he had tried to escape from.

Focus on the first step. The others will follow.

Much good had come out of his experience on Vanqor. The Zone had broken him down in a way that had been helpful. He had felt vulnerable and afraid, and he had leaned on his Master. He had come to see that Obi-Wan cared for him a great deal. His Master would be there for him always. That had been a great gift to carry away from an uncertain time.

Anakin tore his mind away from his own preoccupations and noticed that Ferus looked as though he were debating whether to

Jude Watson

speaking. Anakin hoped he wouldn't. He rarely liked what Ferus Olin had to say.

Siri noted her Padawan's hesitation. "Is there something on your mind, Ferus?" she asked.

"I am just wondering if this plan is appropriate for the Jedi," Ferus said. "It is not for me to question Jedi Masters...."

"Questioning is part of the role of an apprentice," Obi-Wan said kindly. "Go ahead."

"This isn't the kind of thing that a Jedi should do," Ferus said stiffly, obviously uncomfortable at second-guessing his Master. "Impersonating criminals? We are not tricksters. We are ambassadors of peace and justice."

Anakin wanted to roll his eyes. Ferus was such a show-off. He always had to bring up Jedi rules, as if he was the only one who remembered them. Did it ever occur to him that the important thing was to get the job done? Anakin looked over at Siri. She was nodding thoughtfully, as though she was truly considering Ferus's point. He wondered if she was just trying to be a good Master when she really wanted to call him a pompous bore.

"Of course that is true," Siri said. "But the galaxy is complex. The Jedi must operate differently and take different kinds of risks. There are planets that do not welcome our presence, yet circumstances demand that we help for the good of the galaxy." She sighed. "I have gone undercover before, Ferus. The Council decided that it was the only way to infiltrate a vast space pirating operation. I had to pretend to leave the Order. It was difficult. Every Jedi thought I had turned to the dark side, even Obi-Wan."

"It was a great act of bravery on Siri's part," Obi-Wan said.

"Every second of my deception went against my core," Siri continued. "I don't like lies. To live a lie takes a toll. Yet am I glad I did it? Yes. The Jedi were able to bring down a vicious pirate and liberate hundreds of slaves."

"I tangled with Jenna Zander before, when I was your age," Obi-Wan told Ferus. "She is a great enemy of the Jedi. She

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

imprisoned Qui-Gon and drained his life in order to study the Force. She almost killed him. She *has* killed others. She is capable of anything. With the Zone of Self-Containment she could subdue an entire population. We must use any means to stop her.”

“Any means?” Ferus asked.

There was a silence. Anakin saw Obi-Wan exchange a quick glance with Siri. Everyone in the room was thinking the same thing. *Means equal ends*. It was one of the core beliefs of the Jedi. In order to do good, one must act rightly at every step. If the means used were wrong, then the outcome was wrong, too.

“I did not choose my words carefully,” Obi-Wan said. “My meaning is this—if we must use a little deception to catch her, then we will. In this case, our only hope is to beat Zan Arbor at her own game. She could consolidate her power on Romin. She could use the planet as a base for operations, thinking she cannot be touched there. She could do vast amounts of damage. Lives are at stake. Perhaps millions of lives.” Obi-Wan’s keen stare fixed on Ferus. “Don’t you think that is worth forsaking your dignity and taking another’s identity for a few days?”

Ferus’s cheeks colored. Anakin realized that Obi-Wan had put a sure finger on the spot that was most tender in Ferus. His dignity. Obi-Wan had done it kindly, but Ferus had felt a sting.

Ferus nodded. “I will, of course, do as you say.”

“But you must believe it, too,” Siri said.

After a short pause, Ferus said, “I do. I trust that those with more wisdom know the way.”

Ferus seemed to be sincere. He was incapable of lying. Yet it was clear that Siri and Obi-Wan had not done away with all of his uneasiness.

Obi-Wan turned back to Siri and Anakin. “If all goes well, we can brief Master Windu and leave tonight,” he said.

Anakin nodded. He bent his head closer to Siri and Obi-Wan as they discussed their next step. Ferus was silent throughout

Jude Watson

their entire discussion. For once, Ferus was the outsider. For once, it wasn't him.

Chapter Three

Tyro did not tell Obi-Wan the details of the favors he had called in and the promises he had made. He just gave him the results that he'd wanted. It was not the first time that Tyro had proved an invaluable friend.

"I'm still negotiating with the Central Posting Service about the Stop Comm order," Tyro said as Obi-Wan and Anakin greeted him in one of the Temple's small meeting rooms. "The good news is that the order has gone through. The bad news is that I don't know how long I can suppress the announcement of the arrest. But you might as well proceed to the Confiscation Station at the prison. You have a release for Slam's vehicle. It's an Ubrikkian star yacht."

Anakin whistled. "Sweet."

"All the data records, ID text docs, and wardrobes are onboard," Tyro said. A small smile brightened his furry face. "I understand that Slam is a bit of a dandy."

Obi-Wan was more concerned with other matters. "Give us as much time as you can. It will take us a standard day to travel to Romin from the prison."

"You know I will do my best for you, my good friend," Tyro said. "You go into danger, and I wish you safety and success. The

Jude Watson

Svivreni do not say good-bye. We consider it bad luck. We say, *the journey begins, so go.*”

Tyro raised his hand, fingers spread, in the Svivreni gesture of good-bye. Obi-Wan did the same. Tyro then pressed his palm against Obi-Wan’s. It was a gesture used by the Svivreni to those closest to them.

“So go,” Tyro said softly, and left.

Mace’s good-bye was not quite as fond as Tyro’s. He agreed to the necessity of the plan, but he didn’t approve of the rule bending.

“Just try not to alienate the entire Senate,” he said. “In other words, succeed.” He drew his robes together in dismissal. “May the Force be with you, and may I not hear from you until it’s safely over.”

The four Jedi had packed their gear and were streaking across the galaxy within hours.

At the Greylands Security Complex, they had no trouble with the papers Tyro had supplied them with. They were given access to the Slams’ ship.

The Ubrikkian star yacht was a light cruiser, built for quick getaways. Equipped with a hyperdrive, it carried no weapons except for two hidden proton torpedo shafts. It had also been modified to contain more secret compartments than Anakin had ever seen. Every time he thought he had found them all, he discovered another hidden within the various deck platings of the ship. The ship had been scanned by the authorities, in hopes of discovering the cache of crystalline vertex the gang had heisted on the Vuma job. No contraband had been found, and the rest of the gang’s possessions had been searched and then left intact.

Ferus went through the computer files. The gang kept meticulous records and multiple ID docs for false identities. Siri found a device to override iris scans and, rolled into a tiny hidden

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

compartment under the cockpit dash, a detailed analysis of the accounting practices of the Senate Relief Fund.

Ferus whistled under his breath. "I could be wrong, but I think they were planning to rob the Senate depository."

"That's a big job, even for the Slams," Obi-Wan said. "Good thing they landed in prison."

Anakin flipped further through the file. "This is just speculation. They didn't have a concrete plan."

"We'll go over the files in depth later," Siri said, her head in the Slams' personal wardrobe closet. "We'll have to be up on the latest criminal tech scams. There's a criminal gossip network. Our reputation will precede us. We have to *be* the Slams. Speaking of which..."

Siri pulled out a purple cloak made of veda cloth. It was embroidered around the collar with thick braiding in a bright shade of green. "For you, Slam," she said, handing it to Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan eyed the garment. "Questionable taste, to say the least."

Siri winked at Anakin, but the face she turned to Obi-Wan was serious. "Tyro said that Slam is well known as a dandy. You have to wear it."

Obi-Wan's face was a study in distaste as he slipped on the ornate robe. Siri adjusted the elaborate collar so it framed his face. Anakin bit his lip. It was hard to keep his laughter inside.

Siri nodded thoughtfully. "Now you need some boots to match." She leaned over and pulled out a pair in red polished leather. "Here."

Obi-Wan took a step backward. "No..."

"Oh, for galaxy's sake, don't be such a stick-in-the-swamp." Siri tossed the boots at him. "You're impersonating a criminal. You have to dress like him. Don't you want to catch Zan Arbor?"

Jude Watson

Siri turned her head slightly and winked at Anakin again. He turned away to hide his smile. Even Ferus looked as though he was suppressing a laugh.

Obi-Wan kicked off his travel boots and slipped on the soft leather boots. He turned to the large mirror on the inside of the closet door. "I really hate this," he groaned. "I look like a full-feathered idiot."

"I think you look...incredible," Siri said. But her mouth was twitching, as she couldn't keep it in any longer. She burst out into a peal of laughter.

It was impossible for Anakin and Ferus not to join in.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow at them. "So glad to amuse."

Then he reached into another closet. They heard the soft sound of rustling septsilk. Obi-Wan tossed a garment at Siri. It was made of a soft blue clinging material, and there wasn't much of it. "There you go, *Valadon*."

Siri looked at the piece of clothing. "Where's the rest of it?"

Obi-Wan grinned. "I'm afraid that's it."

"I'm not going to wear this." Holding it between her thumb and forefinger, Siri tossed the tiny garment away with distaste.

Obi-Wan's expression was bland as he retrieved it. "Don't be such a stick-in-the-swamp. Don't you want to catch Zan Arbor?"

Grimly, Siri pulled the robe over her tunic and leather leggings. Obi-Wan burst out laughing at the sight of the feminine, flowing garment haphazardly flung over Siri's rough clothes. "I don't think that's how you're supposed to wear it."

Siri gritted her teeth. "We're not on Romin yet."

Still chuckling, Obi-Wan reached into the closet and tossed out more conventional garments for Anakin and Ferus, dark tunics and trousers.

"Anakin, you'll be Waldo, and Ferus will be Ukiah," Obi-Wan said. "You fit the descriptions, roughly. Waldo is the security expert, and Ukiah is weapons and defense. Anakin, you'll need a headgear disguise, since you've seen Zan Arbor recently. I think that should be enough."

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

Obi-Wan pulled a half mask from his knapsack. "I got this from the med clinic at the Temple. It's used to knit synth-flesh together after an injury. We can tell people you were wounded in the escape, if they ask. Try it."

Anakin pulled on the mask. It fit over his forehead and covered half his face, leaving his mouth and chin uncovered. There were holes cut for his eyes, with tinted lenses. It was made of a slippery fiber, and it felt cool against his skin.

He was glad to have something to hide behind. He remembered Zan Arbor's penetrating gaze, the sense that she wanted to explore his mind, figure out the essence of him. He didn't want Zan Arbor to know who he was. He didn't want to get close to the person who could create the Zone of Self-Containment. He still wasn't positive how the Zone was transmitted. He suspected it had been through water. That was something that Zan Arbor had perfected. Anakin never wanted to be under its influence again.

Was he wrong to think there had been some sort of connection between him and Zan Arbor? He hadn't told Obi-Wan about that. She had sensed there was something different about him. He had intrigued her. Even though he'd been in the Zone, he had sensed that this woman had made an impression on him he wouldn't forget. And he had made an impression on her. What if she recognized him again?

Obi-Wan was speaking, and Anakin wrenched his attention back to his Master. "I met Zan Arbor very briefly almost eighteen years ago. She won't recognize me."

Siri wrapped her utility belt around the soft blue robe. "Question. What if we meet someone on Romin who's met the Slams before?"

"Not probable," Obi-Wan said. "The Slams operated in a different corner of the galaxy. Their reputation is big, but they didn't travel very far. It's a risk we'll have to take."

Obi-Wan's comlink signaled. It was Tyro, and Obi-Wan put him in holomode so the rest could view the communication.

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Tyro flickered before them in miniature form. “I’ve received my answer from the authorities,” he said. “I did my best, Obi-Wan. But I could persuade them to agree to keep the Slams’ arrest secret for only three standard days. After that it will be posted on the HoloNet news. I’m sorry. You’ll have to complete your mission in that time.” Tyro looked worried. “Is three days enough?”

“Most likely not,” Obi-Wan said. “But it will have to do.”

Chapter Four

The Teda Landing Platform on Romin was high in the clouds above the capital city of Eliior. It was the only arrival station for the area. Nevertheless, it wasn't crowded. Anakin guided the ship down to the nearly empty platform.

"Not much business or tourism going on here," Obi-Wan observed. "The planet's economy runs on bribes paid to Teda."

"That means that the only one getting rich is Teda," Siri said.

Anakin released the ramp control. Siri strode down in front of Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan was amused by the contrast between Siri's purposeful, athletic stride and the lilac shimmersilk robe she now wore. It was tied with a rose-colored sash embroidered in delicate gold thread, but over the sash Siri had insisted on wearing her battered utility belt. Siri would do her best, she'd promised, but Obi-Wan had his doubts that she would be able to summon up Valadon's trademark flirtatiousness. It was good that this mission would be short.

"Look, that must be Zan Arbor's ship," Anakin murmured to Obi-Wan. Anakin and Ferus were wearing their minimal disguises, while Obi-Wan was nearly unrecognizable in his finery. All had managed to conceal their lightsabers except Siri, whose outfit was simply too revealing to cover much of anything. So Obi-Wan carried hers.

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A sleek white ship was parked in a hangar nearby. Obi-Wan recognized the Luxe Flightwing. The nose of the cruiser was curved, the wings folded back like a bird's in flight. The ship's exterior was made out of a rare gleaming white ore.

A security officer met them at the bottom of the ramp. He was dressed in an ornate uniform with silver cords looping over his shoulders. The Romins were a species with golden skin and eyes. Their noses were flat, barely raised on their faces, and their mouths were wide and expressive.

"Welcome to Romin. Docs, if you please."

Obi-Wan handed over the ID docs. The officer perused them carefully.

"You have come to Romin for what purpose?"

"We would like to relocate here," Obi-Wan said.

The officer looked up. "There are procedures and waivers. We do not allow just anyone to be a citizen of Romin."

"We will be happy to follow all procedures," Obi-Wan said. "In the meantime, we would like to enter your beautiful city." He passed over a bundle of credits.

The officer slid them into his pocket in one practiced movement. "One moment."

The officer left with their four ID docs. He took them to a console and began entering the information.

"He plugged in our names and discovered that we're escaped criminals," Siri murmured as the officer's face changed. He looked up and gave them a quick glance. Then he spoke into his comlink.

They waited. The officer spoke, waited, spoke again. Then he put down the comlink but did not return to the visitors. The Jedi waited. They knew how to be patient. In a few moments, the officer's comlink signaled and he spoke into it again.

"We have to hope that Roy Teda's contacts are wide," Obi-Wan murmured. "He will know that there is a fortune in crystalline vertex out there, and that we know where it is."

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

When the officer returned to them, he was smiling broadly. “Forgive me if I failed to welcome you properly earlier. We are so busy here, you see.”

“Of course,” Obi-Wan said, waving his hand extravagantly and ignoring the empty spaceport.

“Due to your status as important guests, Great Leader Teda would like to extend a personal welcome,” the officer said. “My name is Becka. With your kind permission, I am to escort you to his grand palace.”

Becka led them to a large turbolift, which quickly brought them down to the planet’s surface. A large, six-seat airspeeder was parked nearby. Becka indicated that they should board. He slid into the pilot seat. They glided out into moderate traffic on a wide boulevard.

“Elior has no crime, as you will see,” Becka said. “We have peace and prosperity here. Citizens have plenty of work and plenty of leisure time. Our gardens are renowned and our goods are the finest in the galaxy. I will take you by our best shopping street on the way to the palace and you will see.”

“You are lucky to live on such a world,” Siri said.

“We are lucky to have a leader such as Roy Teda,” he replied. “He has created the great perfection around us.” Just as Becka finished this statement, they drove by a battered security wall, hundreds of meters high. Security droids buzzed overhead.

“What is that?” Obi-Wan asked. He knew the answer, he was just interested in the official explanation. In a dictatorship, it rarely matched reality.

He’d been thoroughly briefed by Tyro. The city of Elior was populated by the wealthy. The workers lived outside the city walls in concentric rings of hovels that grew progressively worse as their distance from the city increased. The wall was manned by guard droids and surveillance devices. The workers had to obtain passes in order to enter the city, and they needed a work reason for coming. Those inside the city rarely ventured outside its walls. If a trip was necessary, it was taken under heavy guard.

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Becka made a quick turn down another wide boulevard lined with tall, leafy trees. “You mean the Cloudflower Wall. Some of our citizens prefer to live outside the city. There is beautiful countryside outside Elior. The wall allows them to have the illusion that they live in wilderness. It is planted with cloudflower vines on the opposite side. Another great step of progression by Great Leader Teda! Truly, he is remarkable.”

Just then they passed a large laserboard. In pulsing light, the image of a noble-looking Romin appeared in profile. Words appeared in Basic:

WATCHING CARING PROTECTING
GREAT STEPS OF PROGRESSION
GREAT LEADER TEDA LOVES HIS PEOPLE

Becka beamed. “Now, here you will see examples of our excellent commerce and wonderful goods.”

They rode down a street full of the exclusive shops that Becka had promised. They caught glimpses of luxurious goods arrayed in bright window displays. Becka slowed down and gestured to the shops with pride. Yet the street was nearly empty. There were hardly any customers in the stores.

“There’s no one in the shops,” Siri said.

“Not a traditional shopping day,” Becka said. “Ah, now, here are our great residences.”

Past the shops, the palaces began, made of stone and durasteel and glimpsed behind fortified walls. One by one, the grand structures appeared, framed by lush gardens and sparkling fountains.

“Many of our most substantial citizens live here,” Becka explained. “One after the other, in luxurious and spacious villas. The boulevard ends at the grand palace complex of Great Leader Teda.”

Soon a pair of ornate gates appeared ahead. Becka stopped the airspeeder at the security checkpoint and was admitted. The

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

massive security gates opened. Ahead was a huge palace that sprawled over a lush landscape of flowers, trees, and shrubs. Flowering vines snaked around the trees and the high walls surrounding the compound. Their scent was heavy in the warm, humid air.

Becka pulled up in front of the main doors. "It was a pleasure to serve you," he said. Then, with an amiable wave, he took off.

The durasteel doors swung open. A short Romin man in flowing multicolored robes stood in the doorway. Obi-Wan recognized him immediately. He was surprised. Great Leader Teda had come to welcome them personally.

"Welcome to my world," Teda said, opening his arms wide. "So, what do you think of my Romin so far?"

Obi-Wan wondered what the flamboyant Slam would say. "Amazing!" he cried. He opened his arms wider than Teda's. "Incredible! We're overcome!"

"I am seeing that this is true by your faces!" Teda answered, beaming. "We Romins are so proud of our world that we are not surprised when visitors decide they must live here. On behalf of all Romins, I welcome you!"

Obi-Wan threw back his purple cloak and gave a short bow. "I am Slam. These are my associates, Valadon, Waldo, and Ukiah."

"And I am Great Leader Teda." Teda ignored Anakin and Ferus and headed directly for Siri. He slipped an arm through hers. "I have heard of your beauty, but words are nothing next to the reality of the realness of you. Your presence will only add to the beauty of our planet. You are prettier than a cloudflower." He stroked her arm with a finger.

The smile on Siri's face seemed fixed with a strong adhesive. Obi-Wan knew she was trying not to recoil from Teda's touch. "You're very kind," she purred admiringly.

He kept his face close to hers. He held up one chubby finger. "I speak only the most truthful truth in everything always. Remember that."

Jude Watson

Siri lifted an eyebrow. "Truth in everything always? Then the reports are correct. You *are* a rare being."

Teda hesitated as he puzzled out what Siri meant. Then he laughed. "I'm hearing you now, and you have wit! You will return and have a long, lengthy lunch with me in my private dining room."

"Spoken like a true leader," Siri said through her tight smile. "You are used to being obeyed, I see. You issue invitations like orders."

Teda laughed again. He seemed delighted with everything Siri had to say. "Again, I am loving this. But unfortunately as a leader I have meetings, too many, always, I am telling you. You don't know the burden of my burdens. But I have them and I must attend to them." Reluctantly, he dropped Siri's arm. "But first, allow me to ease the difficulties of your first days on Romin. There is a villa nearby, small, but perfect. You will stay there. It is for sale, so it is unoccupied and empty right now. If you wish to buy it, you will buy it. If not, you will find something else equally as perfect. But for now, you may stay there without payment. My gift to you." His gaze lingered on Siri. "Beauty deserves beautiful surroundings."

"That is quite generous," Obi-Wan enthused. "We thank you." No doubt Teda wanted to keep tabs on them. It wasn't a problem. It was better that Teda think that he had them under his thumb.

"Now deputy Hansel will take care of you. For your listening pleasure, he will tell you a few things about the pleasurable pleasures of Romin." Teda gave Siri a meaningful look. "I will see you all again before too long. Or sooner, even."

The Great Leader turned abruptly and disappeared into the palace. Another Romin immediately appeared. He had obviously been waiting just out of sight.

"I am Hansel. Welcome to Romin. You have already seen something of the city of Elior. While we enjoy a thriving economy, there are several charities close to the Great Leader's

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

heart that are short of the funds they need to fully extend the great steps of progression. There is the Teda Institute for Children, for example. Also, the Teda Gallery of Horticultural Treasures of Romin. There are many native plants that are sadly in need of extra attention. I tell you this only so that you realize that Romin is not absolutely perfect in all areas. It is only correct that we do so. Great Leader Teda believes in truth in everything always.”

“Yes, he already told us that,” Siri said. “Naturally, it is true because he says it is, as he doesn’t lie.”

Hansel gave Siri a sharp look. Then he nodded politely. “Precisely.”

Obi-Wan nudged her to be quiet. Insolence wasn’t going to get them anywhere. It was obvious that Hansel was the official who had been sent to collect the bribe. Discreetly, Obi-Wan pulled out from beneath his layered robes a small bag stuffed with credits. “Please allow us to contribute to the needs of Romin’s children,” he said formally.

“Your generosity is astonishing. I will inform Great Leader Teda of it. And, in the days or weeks to come, I hope you will allow us to call upon you if we find there is an especially pressing need....”

More bribes to come. Obi-Wan bowed his head. “Of course.”

“Now, let me arrange transportation for you,” Hansel said. “I understand that you will be occupying a villa in the secluded section.”

“Thank you for your kind offer, but may we walk?” Obi-Wan asked, purposely modulating his voice. “If you give us directions, we’d like to stroll to our lodgings. It has been a long journey and before that we were...not able to get much exercise in the open air.”

“Of course,” Hansel said, not surprised in the least. “I will arrange for your things to be delivered. Just walk out the main gate and turn left. After five homes, you will see the villa. It is a golden color with a fountain in front. It has a black gate.”

Jude Watson

The Jedi walked away, several kilograms of credits lighter.

"I can't believe this," Ferus said. "The children of Romin will never see those credits."

"Not to mention the plants," Anakin said.

"This isn't a joke," Ferus said. "We just paid a fortune to a crook."

"We knew it was the only way to remain on Romin," Anakin said. "It does no good to question the decision now."

"I'm not questioning it," Ferus said defensively. "But I don't have to like it, either."

Obi-Wan listened to their bickering but decided not to interfere. Anakin and Ferus had to work out their mutual dislike on their own. Besides, he sympathized with Anakin. Ferus's self-righteousness could wear on the nerves. Paying the bribe had been a necessary step. It was useless to regret it.

"Teda doesn't seem very bright," Obi-Wan said, changing the subject. "I expected something different."

"He doesn't have to be bright, he just has to be a thug," Siri pointed out.

"It took us a day to get here, so we only have two days left," Obi-Wan said. "We should do some reconnaissance of Zan Arbor's house. It should be nearby, if we have the right coordinates. We'll do a quick survey of her security. Then we'd better get settled in the villa. No doubt Great Leader Teda will be keeping an eye on us."

A security officer opened the gate for them. They walked down the wide street, past the grand walls behind which palaces crouched, protected against invaders.

"I've never seen so many walls and gates in one city before," Anakin observed. "I guess the criminals here have plenty of enemies."

"That's why they pay Teda so much. For refuge," Obi-Wan said. The four of them made their way down several long avenues, trying to keep a low profile. "Here is Zan Arbor's villa. Slow just a bit. See without looking."

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

Seeing without looking was a Jedi technique. Although they all appeared to be strolling by, each of them ticked off every security measure the villa had.

“The usual and then some,” Siri said once they’d passed. “Security towers, armed windows, and doors.”

“Infrared night sensors,” Anakin added.

“Rooftop surveillance droids,” Ferus said. “Plus random invisible energy fences on the grounds. This will be tough to break into.”

“We’ll take the easy way,” Obi-Wan said.

“There’s an easy way?” Ferus asked.

“There always is,” Obi-Wan said. “We just walk in the front door.”

Chapter Five

The Jedi arrived at their villa. It was modest, considering the neighborhood, but it was still several cuts above the places Obi-Wan and Anakin usually stayed on a mission. The sleep couches were deep and piled with luxurious coverlets. The reception rooms were large and sunny. A garden off the kitchen held flowering plants and flourishing vegetables and herbs.

“Are you sure we have to leave here in two days?” Anakin asked wonderingly.

Siri was completely uninterested in her surroundings. “They’ve created a paradise within the city walls, but it’s an empty one. There is no economy to speak of. Did you see those stores? Expensive things to buy, but nobody except Teda and his confederates can afford them. And the workers live in misery right outside the walls.” She shook her head. “How can anyone enjoy all this, knowing that?”

“It doesn’t surprise me,” Obi-Wan said. “They are glad they are inside the city walls, not outside. Now, we’d better get started.” He turned to Anakin and Ferus. “Siri and I will make the first visit to Zan Arbor to gather information. In the meantime, you two should do some basic reconnaissance. Walk the streets. Have conversations. Note security, traffic patterns, and escape routes.”

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

“Any specific objectives in mind?” Ferus asked.

“No,” Obi-Wan said. “You never know what will turn out to be useful later.”

“I’ve studied the maps of the city,” Ferus said. “I’m sure I can plot possible escape routes or—”

Obi-Wan interrupted him curtly. “Maps are useful, but I learned something else from Qui-Gon. A map is not the territory. Go.”

The two Padawans hurried off. Siri adjusted her utility belt. “I’m assuming you have a plan.”

“Almost,” Obi-Wan said. “Just follow my lead. Unless...”

“Unless?”

“Unless you’d rather stop off at Teda’s for that lunch,” Obi-Wan teased. He ducked as an overstuffed pillow, lifted by the Force, flew straight at his head.

It was easy to get an audience with Jenna Zan Arbor. Obi-Wan merely announced at the front gate that Slam and Valadon wished to see her. Apparently, egomaniacal evil scientists and master thieves needed no introduction, for they were ushered inside immediately.

They were led to a room overlooking the gardens by a tall, hulking Phlog who was obviously a bodyguard. His gigantic hands pushed open a pair of double doors. As he walked through, his head barely cleared the doorway.

Zan Arbor sat in a chair perfectly positioned to backlight her bright hair and soften her features. She wore a simple silver gown with an azure belt.

Obi-Wan hadn’t seen her in eighteen years. During that time he had changed much. He was taller. Older. Less surprised at the galaxy, and more rueful. Maybe sadder. On his occasional glimpses in a mirror, he saw the years on his face. It did not concern him; the fact that the years marked him was inevitable and right. Yet Zan Arbor looked almost unchanged from when

Jude Watson

he had known her. No doubt she consulted the best medical data in the galaxy to keep herself looking so well-preserved.

Obi-Wan bowed. "Thank you for seeing us."

Even while she smiled a greeting, Zan Arbor's green eyes ticked over him and Siri. "We new arrivals on Romin should stick together," she said. "Great Leader Teda has told me of your accomplishments. I was eager to make your acquaintance. Your reputation precedes you."

"As does yours," Obi-Wan complimented.

Zan Arbor waved at two ornate chairs placed in front of her. As Obi-Wan and Siri sat, she began to pour tea from a silver pot. The cups were made of translucent porcelain that Obi-Wan could see was among the finest the galaxy had to offer. Lovely urns and bowls were placed in a cabinet made of gleaming wood with fittings carved from rare stones. He looked around the beautifully appointed room. How had Zan Arbor managed to set herself up in such luxury so soon?

"And how are you finding Romin so far?" she asked, handing Siri a cup while seeming to notice every detail of her dress, down to her bare legs and her soft gold boots. Zan Arbor's lips pressed together in some kind of disapproval.

"We've only just arrived," Siri said. "But we are delighted to find it so pleasant and luxurious. Not to mention safe."

"Yes, you will not have to worry here," Zan Arbor said, handing a cup to Obi-Wan. "Great Leader Teda protects his friends. Romin is a perfect place to retire." She took a sip of tea, lowering her eyelids.

"Or not," Obi-Wan said.

Zan Arbor looked up.

"It is also," Obi-Wan said loudly, "a perfect place from which to do business."

Zan Arbor inclined her head. "That, too. Or so I hear."

"And we are far too young to retire," Siri said, following Obi-Wan's lead.

"As are you, I am sure," Obi-Wan said.

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

Carefully, Zan Arbor put her teacup down on a polished stone table. "Perhaps you should tell me why you've come."

"We've come to make the acquaintance of the finest scientific mind in the galaxy, it is true," Obi-Wan said, crossing his legs and smoothing out some of the feathers attached to his cloak. "We have also come to tempt you with an offer."

"I assure you, I am retired." Zan Arbor slid an errant blond hair back into her perfect coiffure. "But I am listening."

"We have a plan that I'm not at liberty to discuss fully," Obi-Wan continued. "It involves a great deal of wealth. A planetary treasury, in fact. You may have heard that we've had some success in that area. We're a modest bunch, but we're most confident we can build on that success." Obi-Wan smiled. Wouldn't Slam smile, at this moment? A con man would toot his own horn, but he would do it with a wink. He would seduce his listener.

Zan Arbor seemed to respond to his smile. She waved a hand, allowing him to proceed.

"We have the tech diagrams and a detailed way to get inside our target," Obi-Wan said. "We just need help with the guards. If we had an air delivery system that would slow down or incapacitate them for twenty minutes, we could raid the entire treasury."

Zan Arbor gave a tiny smile. "And so you came to me."

"Word has reached us of your experiments on Vanqor," Siri broke in. "An exciting development. You have the key to controlling minds. If you can control minds, you can control fortunes." She shrugged. "It's as simple as that."

"Or as complicated."

"We would arrange it so that your involvement would remain hidden," Siri continued. "We would take all the risks."

"You would be an equal partner, however," Obi-Wan said.

"We have the false ID docs ready," Siri said. "We can leave tomorrow. Tonight, if you wish. You could come aboard our

Jude Watson

ship, and we'd have you back here in two days. No one would even have to know you were gone."

Obi-Wan admired how Siri had picked up on his plan. Once they were in space, they could take her back to the prison planet. They would put her into custody without anyone getting hurt. Obi-Wan was hoping that her greed would be her undoing.

"A little effort for a great reward," Obi-Wan said. He flashed her a smile again, but this time she did not respond as before. He felt his heart sink.

"Why would I do this?" Zan Arbor waved a hand. "As you can see, I have everything I want. Every luxury is here. I live in a palace. I have the fastest ship in the galaxy at my disposal. What more do I need?"

"I have found," Obi-Wan said softly, "that there are needs, and there are wants. So the question is not what more do you need, but what more do you *want*?"

She raised an eyebrow, impressed with this despite herself. "Very clever. But I can supply my own wants." She pushed her tea tray away in dismissal. "Your little plan sounds intriguing. I wish you luck with it."

"I assure you, the rewards are greater than you can imagine," Obi-Wan said, trying again.

This seemed to amuse Zan Arbor greatly. "I doubt that." She gave a small laugh, as though to herself. "There is what I can imagine, and what actually lies ahead. I'm sorry to say that you must have more than this to tempt me. But don't take it personally. We cannot be collaborators, but we're going to be neighbors. Let us be friends as well."

Pasting a smile on his face, Obi-Wan thought for a moment. He refused to believe that Zan Arbor had truly retired. Why would she turn down a chance to raid a planetary treasury with very little risk to herself? Of course, she might be wary to commit to a plan with a gang she didn't know. Yet she had dismissed them quickly and then closed the door against any further exploration of working together.

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

Zan Arbor stood. "This has been lovely. I'm sure we'll meet again. Hue will see you out."

The same tall Phlog appeared. Zan Arbor disappeared through the doorway, leaving a waft of perfume behind.

"Charm him," Obi-Wan quickly whispered to Siri as he pretended to swipe a sweet from the tray.

She looked at Obi-Wan in disbelief. "Are you serious? He's a walking slab of muscle. It would be like charming a side of bantha meat."

"Valadon could do it," Obi-Wan pointed out.

He heard her breath hiss out between her teeth.

Obi-Wan hesitated by the tea table, pretending to finish his cup of tea. Siri sauntered across the room to Hue. Obi-Wan watched her over the rim of his cup.

He almost choked. The Siri he knew was gone. This Siri didn't stride across the room. She...*wafted*. Something happened with her hips and her legs and her hair. He wasn't sure what. He just knew that they moved differently. He just knew that whatever it was, it was female.

Siri locked her blue eyes on the Phlog's face. "You are one tall specimen, even for a Phlog," she said in a silky voice that was just as new to Obi-Wan. "You know, I always had a special thing for Phlogs. I feel so...protected when I'm around them."

Hue didn't blink, just kept dull dark eyes on Siri's face. "As long as we're on your side," he said sharply.

She smiled. "Is that a threat? Oooh. I'd better be on my best behavior."

Oooh? Did I just hear correctly? Obi-Wan couldn't believe it.

"You seem to be doing all right," the Phlog said.

"I've always wanted my very own bodyguard," Siri purred. "If you ever get tired of working here..."

"I'm tired of working here every day," Hue said. "But I work where the pay is. Know what I mean?"

"Very wise. I so admire a practical male," Siri cooed.

Jude Watson

The slab of meat and muscle that was the Phlog looked suddenly as though his bones were made of crankcase oil. His hungry eyes followed Siri's every move as she enticed him farther out of the room and down the hallway.

"Could you take just the teeniest moment and let me peek into the gallery?" she asked him. "I'd love to see more of the house."

The Phlog followed Siri in her drifting shimmersilk as though he were attached by a string. Obi-Wan put down his teacup. The Phlog seemed smitten, but Obi-Wan doubted he had more than a minute.

He had been busy while chatting with Zan Arbor. He had practiced seeing without looking. He knew that the intricate and beautiful cabinetry concealed something. The joinery at the hinges and openings told him that.

He ran his fingers over the cabinet, calling on the Force to help his instinct, his vision, the very cells on his fingertips. He wished Anakin were here. Anakin's Force connection never failed to astonish him, even in his ease with inanimate objects. Once Anakin had told him that Soara Antana, the great Jedi fighter, had taught him how to let walls speak to him. Since then, Anakin had seemed to be able to judge the space between molecules as well as the objects the molecules made up.

Obi-Wan knew that somewhere in this house was evidence that Zan Arbor was planning something. It was an instinct, based on knowledge of her. Greed drove her, of course, but also her ego. She was not the type to retire.

And when she had said, *There is what I can imagine, and what actually lies ahead*, what had she meant? At first he'd thought that she was referring to the fact that he could have been overstating the rewards of his plan. But now he didn't think so. She was making a private reference to her own plans. Plans that would make his seem puny. That was the reason she had dismissed them.

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

Ah...there. Obi-Wan found the invisible seam. Another half second later, he found the catch. The cabinet opened silently, revealing a datapad, holofiles, comlinks—a concealed office.

He quickly pressed keys on the datapad. To his relief, not all the files were coded. He had so little time. He would have to start with the last file Zan Arbor had consulted. He keyed in the necessary steps. He, as well as Anakin, regularly kept up with the latest techniques from the tech expert at the Temple, Jedi Master Toma Hi'Ilani.

The holofile appeared in front of him. Communications from someone or some organization, merely identified with a random series of numbers that changed with every communication. A standard device for concealment.

He scanned it quickly. He could hear Siri's voice now, heading back toward the reception room, pitched just a bit louder to warn him. He read quickly.

Safe houses arranged...

Officials to bribe have been contacted...

A start date must be decided on with care...

Everything depends upon...

Obi-Wan whipped out his datapad and slipped in a miniature disk. It would take only a few seconds to copy the file.

"Oh, can't I just peek into the kitchen? You can't imagine how much I love to cook...no?" He could hear the playful petulance in Siri's voice, almost see her mouth pursing in a pout.

Ten seconds to go...

"Now, where did Slam go? I thought he was right behind us. He's probably still eating those sweets..."

Five seconds...

"Oops, I dropped my scarf..."

Done.

Obi-Wan closed the holofile, slid the office shelf back into the cabinet, closed the false front, adjusted an urn, closed the cabinet, threw himself into a chair, and swept the sweets off the

Jude Watson

tray. He stuffed some down his tunic and two in his mouth just as they walked in the doors.

“Mmmffffphhh,” he said to Siri.

She sighed. “I knew it! You ate them all! So rude, I have to apologize for him. We’ll be going now.”

Giving Hue a last flirtatious smile, Siri beckoned to Obi-Wan. Followed by the heavy tread of the Phlog, they accessed the front door and escaped into the sunlight.

“That had better be worth it,” Siri said.

“It was,” Obi-Wan said. “Zan Arbor is planning something. I made a copy of a work disk. Some of the files are coded. I can try to crack them back at the villa.”

Siri shuddered. “I think that Phlog left fingerprints on my arm.”

“*Oooh*,” Obi-Wan teased.

Siri raised an eyebrow at him as they walked. “If you want to stay alive,” she warned, “don’t ever make that sound again.”

Chapter Six

They had seen the rich part of the city, so Anakin and Ferus searched out the scruffier streets, the places where commerce took place. Here there were small shops and businesses and warehouses, the engine that made the city run. It didn't take them long to realize how great the poverty of the workers was in contrast to the grand palaces in Teda's section of the city, and they weren't even outside the city walls yet.

Anakin's heart swelled with disgust. He had to concentrate to keep his breathing even. He had grown up with injustice. He had tasted it in his mouth like the sand that filled the air of Tatooine. The hatred he felt was bred in his bones.

"I hope one day Teda will pay for his crimes," Ferus said quietly. "He is robbing his citizens."

"He is killing them," Anakin said fiercely. "You don't know what it's like to be them. I do."

He had spoken angrily, dismissively. But Ferus didn't take offense. He merely nodded.

"Yes, you do," he agreed. "That is your great strength, Anakin."

His strength? Anakin had always thought of it as his weakness.

Jude Watson

They were close to the wall now. They didn't want to get too close, for fear of alerting the security droids to their presence. Still, they wanted to observe the checkpoints. If access to their ship was suddenly cut off, would they be able to slip out of the city and disappear?

A shadow seemed to pass over him, although the bright sun was overhead. Anakin felt a Force surge, a warning. "Someone is tailing us," he told Ferus.

Ferus didn't turn. "I didn't see anyone."

"I feel it."

After a moment, Ferus spoke. "I feel it, too."

"Let's lead whoever it is on and then double back and see who it is," Anakin suggested.

They picked up their pace slightly, weaving in and out of alleys and staying in the shadows of the buildings. This close to the security wall, the section was run-down. Water ran down the gutters and pooled in the cracking pavement. Warehouses looked old and badly in need of repair. Occasionally they heard the scuttling of rodent creatures.

They turned a corner to a short block. Ahead, three dark alleys radiated out and were swallowed up in darkness. Perfect.

They didn't have to talk. They both began to run. They darted into the middle alley. Using cable launchers, they climbed to the top of the warehouse. From this vantage point they would see whoever was tailing them.

Below they saw a Romin cautiously move forward, gazing around with every step. He looked familiar.

"It's Hansel," Anakin said. "Come on."

He jumped to an overhang below, then down to the street directly in front of Hansel. Ferus followed a split second later.

Hansel gave a small yelp and jumped backward in fright.

"Looking for us?" Anakin asked.

Hansel tried to disguise his involuntary start of fear. He coughed and straightened his robes. "Ah, as a matter of fact,

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

yes.” He looked at them, his golden eyes speculative. “I did not expect to have to follow you here.”

“Just doing a little sight-seeing,” Ferus said.

“Let me assure both of you,” Hansel said, “there are better sights to be seen. A curious choice, on your part.”

“We got lost. What can we do for you?” Anakin asked.

“I am to deliver an invitation,” Hansel said. “To Slam and Valadon. And the two of you, of course. Great Leader Teda is having a reception tomorrow evening and wishes you all to attend. Everyone will be there. You will meet many like yourselves.”

“We accept, with pleasure,” Ferus said.

“Be sure to give the message to Valadon,” Hansel said. “Teda especially wishes her to be there.”

“She wouldn’t miss it,” Anakin said.

“I will inform Great Leader Teda,” Hansel said. “Now, no doubt you would like to continue your...sight-seeing.”

He bowed and walked off, moving quickly.

“An invitation could’ve been sent to our villa. He suspects us of something,” Ferus said.

“He just doesn’t know what,” Anakin said. “But we’ll be gone before he figures it out. Well, I guess we should head back.”

“I guess,” Ferus said. “It’s hard to know when we’re done, isn’t it? We had no clear objective. I like a clear objective. Otherwise I feel like I’m getting it wrong.”

Anakin looked at him curiously as they began to walk. “I didn’t think you ever thought you were wrong.”

“I know that’s what other Padawans think. It’s because I try not to let it show. Don’t you?”

Anakin snapped his mouth shut. Just when he thought he’d have a normal conversation with Ferus, he got caught up short again. Ferus was trying to trap him. He wanted him to admit weakness so he’d have something on him.

“This whole mission is unclear,” Ferus went on, not realizing that Anakin had stiffened beside him. “I’ll be happy when—”

Jude Watson

The Force surged again. But this time it was too late. Caught up in their conversation and the relief of finding that it was only Hansel who had tailed them, they had let down their guard.

Their attackers came from behind on airspeeders. They used cables to knock Anakin and Ferus off their feet. Black hoods were thrown over their heads and tied shut.

Anakin rolled away from their attackers and rose to his feet in one fluid motion, ready to fight but not revealing his lightsaber. The hood was fastened in a way he couldn't figure out. That wasn't a problem. He had learned to fight in darkness; it was part of his Jedi training. But on Romin they were under strict orders not to use their lightsabers unless they absolutely had to. They had to retain their cover as part of the Slam gang.

Which meant they might learn more if they allowed themselves to be kidnapped. He could resist later. Anakin hoped that Ferus had come to the same conclusion.

He felt himself being shoved into a vehicle. Ferus hit the seat next to him.

"Any ideas?" Ferus grunted in a whisper.

"We might as well see who kidnapped us, and why," Anakin whispered back. "I think you just got your clear objective, Ferus."

A snort came from under Ferus's hood. "I would have preferred a different method. But thanks."

Chapter Seven

The hood was suddenly wrenched off Anakin's head. He took a deep breath of fresh air.

Only the air wasn't fresh. It was dank and murky, not much better than the hot, close air under the hood.

"That's right," a masculine voice said in a tone edged with sarcasm. "Take a deep breath of the wholesome country air of Teda Estates."

Anakin couldn't see who spoke. A bright light was in his eyes, and the rest of the room was in deep shadow. Ferus was next to him, his chin up as he tried to blink against the light. Anakin tensed, as if for a blow. He was ready to fight at any moment.

"Relax. We don't want to hurt you. We want to hire you. For stang's sake, B, turn off that light."

The light went out. Now the only light came from small windows cut in some sort of wooden structure. Water pooled on the hard-packed dirt floor. Anakin could hear the steady *drip, drip* of bad plumbing.

A Romin male emerged from the shadows. He was tall and slender. Energy seemed to be collected in his muscles and radiated out from his gestures and his pale eyes of light gold. The rest of the group stayed in the shadows.

Jude Watson

“Sorry for the method,” the tall Romin said. He pointed to Anakin’s mask. “At least you are used to masks.”

“Not really,” Anakin said.

“We can’t exactly issue nice personal invitations the way our Great Leader can. We needed to talk to you, and we needed to do it without any prying eyes or ears. We have a proposition.”

“Who are you?” Ferus asked.

“My name is Joylin,” the Romin answered. He brought a chair over by hooking his foot over the rail and dragging it. He sat astride, facing them. “I am the leader of the resistance on this planet. My face and name are well known to Teda. There’s no need for concealment. My compatriots, however, are less well known and will remain hidden from you. The only thing you need to know is that there are many of us, and we do not all reside beyond the wall.”

Which, Anakin reasoned, meant there were resistance members, or spies, in the city itself.

“What do you want with us?” Anakin asked. “We only just arrived on Romin.”

“Exactly,” Joylin said. “You do not yet have ties here. You have no friends, no loyalties. So you don’t need to betray anyone to help us. Instead, you will do a straight trade. We will pay you, and you will help us. We are in need of your special skills.”

“Why should we help you?” Ferus asked.

“Because you are thieves, and we will pay you,” Joylin said impatiently. “And if you wish to remain on Romin, it would be a good idea to be on the winning side.”

“The winning side? Are you going up against Teda and expecting to win?” Ferus looked around at the decaying structure. He was playing the game well, Anakin saw. A member of the Slams would naturally be incredulous and disdainful.

He decided to give Ferus the lead. In contrast, he would be the sympathetic one. They needed to find out as much as they could about this group.

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

“We will win because we have to win.” Joylin spoke without anger, without bravado. “What never fails to amuse me is when beings underestimate the power of desperation.”

Ferus said nothing. Anakin waited.

Joylin spread his arms. “This is how we live on the other side of the wall. This is a typical dwelling. The only difference is, two or three families are usually crowded within its walls. Disease is rampant. Many of our children die before their second birthday. The ones who survive have no hope of getting better than a menial position, of traveling to the city once a day to rake a lawn, clean a sewer, fix a dataport.”

“We have nothing to do with your troubles,” Ferus said.

“Ah, of course not. You just take advantage of them. You accept the offer of a tyrant for a hideout.”

Anakin broke in. “Are you going to insult us or offer us a job?”

A strained smile creased Joylin’s face. “Right. Okay, here is the offer. We’ll pay double your going rate for stealing a certain piece of information at Teda’s villa. We’ve been waiting for the right events to coincide, and at last they have. Teda is giving a big reception, and thieves with special skills have arrived on Romin.”

“You want us to steal from *Teda*?” Ferus blustered. “Forget it!”

“What do you want us to steal?” Anakin asked quickly.

“A small item from his private office,” Joylin said. “It contains information that will guarantee our success. Within a short time we will be able to take over the government. Which means you will be the only group of criminals allowed to stay on Romin. Each member of your gang will be given lifetime citizenship. As long as you don’t break Romin’s laws, you’ll be welcome here.”

“Keep talking,” Anakin said. “We need more to take back to our boss.”

Jude Watson

“We happen to know that in Teda’s study there is a list of codes that control the security gates to all official government offices and residences, as well as the sheltered criminals.”

“Wait a minute.” Anakin pretended not to understand. “Are you telling us that Teda has access to everyone’s personal security?”

Joylin nodded. “It’s not a secret. Most of them accept it as the price for staying on Romin. He says he needs to be able to lock down the palace neighborhood in case of unrest.”

“How do you know he has the codes in his residence?” Ferus asked.

“You will have to trust that our information is accurate,” Joylin said. “We have someone on the inside.”

“Can that someone help us get into the palace?” Anakin asked.

“No,” Joylin said. “We can’t compromise our agents. Besides, you don’t need help. You have an invitation to a reception, don’t you? That is the night we want you to steal the codes.”

“How do you know we’ve been invited?” Ferus challenged.

“We know,” Joylin said. “I told you, there are many of us. Enough to ensure success, if we strike quickly and decisively.”

Anakin looked at Ferus. It was strange. He didn’t even like Ferus, but now that they were together in this situation, he could read him without speaking. They were in tune. They needed to get more information. To do that, they had to draw Joylin out. They would do it in tandem.

Ferus shook his head. “I’m sorry, but we have to refuse.”

Joylin’s face tightened. “Can you tell me your objections?”

“Delighted,” Ferus said. “You’re asking us to stake our future on a bet. That normally wouldn’t be a problem. We risk our future all the time. But the reason we’re successful is that we’re careful. You’re asking us to make a powerful man our enemy, just when he’s offered us safe refuge.”

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

“This is not a safe refuge,” Joylin argued. “I assure you, your protection will disappear. Unless you throw your support to the ultimate winners.”

“But if we don’t steal the codes, you have no chance,” Ferus argued back.

“There will still be a revolt,” Joylin said. “It just won’t be bloodless. You will be in more danger the other way, because I won’t protect you.”

Ferus started to say something, but Anakin broke in. It was time to draw Joylin in. Sometimes Anakin wasn’t sure if it was the Force or his instincts, but he was getting better at seeing inside beings, sensing their fears and motivations. Joylin might be sitting casually, but Anakin could feel his urgency. And underneath the urgency, fear. The Slams could be his last chance.

“We still need more information,” Anakin said carefully. “Surely you can see that we can’t simply take your word for what you say.”

“I’m hardly about to compromise the safety of those in the resistance just to reassure you,” Joylin said.

“We’re not asking you to reveal identities or secrets,” Anakin told him. “But what makes you think you can overthrow Teda so easily? When are you going to do it? What will happen when you do? You are asking us to trust you. You must trust us. We are taking a risk for you. You must do the same.”

Joylin hesitated. He looked at both of them. He did not glance behind at the watching, shadowy group.

It’s his decision, Anakin thought. He’s the boss.

“The revolt is to be the night of the reception,” Joylin said.

Someone behind him gasped. Someone else said, “No!”

Joylin only half turned. “We must tell them! Once they know, they will help us.” He turned back to Anakin and Ferus. “We’ll start by disrupting communication systems—just some low-level interference at first. We have already infiltrated Teda’s Security Management Control. We have one chance to sabotage the CIP controls for the droid army that Teda uses to control the city and

Jude Watson

guard the wall. If we strike that blow simultaneously with the capture of all government officials and Teda himself, we can win without bloodshed. We'll simply lock the officials and their personal troops inside their houses. Without the officials, without the droid army, we can take over."

Ferus and Anakin didn't say anything for a moment.

"You can assure us that the droid army will be in your control?" Ferus asked.

"Yes."

"You will pay us double the rate?" Anakin asked. He named the figure.

"We have it. It has taken years," Joylin said. "Every family, every individual, has gone without in order to feed our treasury."

"We're not interested in how you got it," Ferus said with a wave of his hand. "But we need to assure for ourselves that you *do* have it. Half before, half after the revolt."

"Agreed," Joylin said.

"We need more detailed information on where we can find the codes," Anakin said, all business now.

"All you have to do is get beyond the guards. I understand that you are somewhat expert at that."

Anakin and Ferus nodded. "We must take this back to Slam and Valadon," Anakin said. "We will need a way to contact you."

"We will be contacting you tomorrow morning," Joylin said. "Don't look for us. We'll be there. Now, I'll escort you as far as the wall. I'm sure you were told it is planted with cloudflower vines. It may not surprise you to find that isn't the case. Like peace and justice on Romin, the name of the wall is just an illusion."

Anakin and Ferus stood. "Just one more thing," Anakin said.

Joylin looked at him. With a deal so close to being made, his anxiety had increased. Anakin could feel it humming like a charge in the air.

"We are interested in one of the residents here," Anakin continued casually. "A scientist named Jenna Zan Arbor. You

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

must guarantee safe passage for her off-planet. We will arrange transportation.”

Ferus’s eyes flickered with surprise at Anakin’s proposal. *What if Joylin backed out?* Anakin knew he wouldn’t. Joylin was good at concealment. It was most likely a way of life for him. But Anakin could feel his hunger.

If the coup went through as planned, Zan Arbor would be desperate to get away. The Slams could offer her a way out. With the collapse of Teda, her security would crumble. She would need help.

“That is not a problem,” Joylin said. “As long as you are in.”

Chapter Eight

“He tells us there is no risk, but of course there is risk,” Ferus said later that evening. Obi-Wan, Siri, Anakin, and Ferus had eaten a meal around a tiled table in a small, lovely room overlooking the garden. They were careful to speak of nothing of consequence during the meal. They had to assume that the villa had listening devices. But afterward they had gone into the garden. Then they had continued the discussion that had begun when Anakin and Ferus had first returned to the villa and beckoned to Obi-Wan and Siri to come outside.

“It’s a risk worth taking,” Anakin said. Obi-Wan was glad to hear that there was not the usual edge in his voice. Anakin was disagreeing with Ferus. That was usual. But he was doing it without resentment. That was good.

Their adventure together had brought Anakin and Ferus closer. Obi-Wan didn’t delude himself that they were friends. But he did think something had changed.

He kept only half his attention on the argument, letting the words of the others wash over him. With the other half of his mind, he was flipping through the holofile he’d copied at Zan Arbor’s. He had read every word of the uncoded files, enough to tell that she was planning a new operation, this time with partners. *Everything depends upon secrecy and speed.*

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

The rest of the files were coded, and he had tried the most difficult formulas he knew to break the code. He had called for help from the Temple and had worked with one of their codebreakers. No luck.

Siri was hanging back, letting the two apprentices discuss the situation. It was good for them to do so, and they were doing it well.

“If we help them, we will be actively supporting an overthrow of power on a planet,” Ferus said. “We have no Senate authorization to do so.”

“We are not the ones overthrowing Teda,” Anakin objected. “And the citizens of Romin are suffering. If we can help them and achieve our mission, why shouldn’t we?”

“Because it can get out of control,” Ferus argued. “Joylin can surprise us. We don’t know anything about this resistance movement. We don’t know who they are or what they want, apart from overthrowing Teda.”

“They are an established resistance group,” Siri broke in. “I contacted Jocasta Nu to ask about them. They have been put down in brutal reprisals, but the movement has been growing steadily in response to Teda’s crackdowns. Madame Nu believes there may be support within Teda’s government as well. They, too, are tired of living in fear. Teda’s prisons are notorious and overcrowded, and you earn a harsh sentence if you displease him. She would not be surprised if many in the army desert. Many of them have families who live outside the wall. They know firsthand the misery and poverty there.”

“You see?” Anakin said. “Joylin and his group are fighting for justice. As we are. We can help them *and* bring Zan Arbor back to the prison world. You’re making this complicated, Ferus. It isn’t.”

I’m making this too complicated, Obi-Wan thought. *It isn’t.*

He thought for a moment, remembering Zan Arbor’s primary obsession. He keyed it in as a password: The Force.

Jude Watson

The files opened like the motion-sensor doors at the Warm Welcome Inn on Coruscant. One after the other they flashed *code accepted*. Obi-Wan accessed the first file. The voices of the others faded as he began to scroll through the information.

A chill ran over him, even though the night was warm. The letters pulsed before his eyes. A name he hadn't expected to see. Yet shouldn't he have been prepared for it? Wouldn't Zan Arbor naturally gravitate toward the most powerful criminal in the galaxy, one with the wealth and organization to help her with any scheme she might devise? Or had he contacted her, the one scientist brilliant and amoral enough to join with him? Didn't they share the obsession with the Force and how it worked?

Granta Omega.

A copy of a message, a profuse thank you from Zan Arbor for Omega's hosting of their first meeting.

A quick message saying she had to evacuate the Vanqor system and would be in touch.

A confirmation of their next meeting, in which she alluded to their shared interest in the Force.

Another letter, promising to destroy all written records of their correspondence, a promise that of course she had not kept, possibly as security.

Obi-Wan flipped through the next file. The two of them were careful. They never said exactly what they were planning. Yet it was clear the operation would take place on a large planet in the Core. It would net them not only wealth, but influence.

Siri's voice broke through his thoughts.

"I've listened to you both very carefully, as has Obi-Wan," she said, shooting him a chastising look, for it was clear to her that he hadn't been paying attention in the least. "You both make valid points. We must make a decision, however. I think we should go ahead and help Joylin's group. Obi-Wan?"

"There is another factor we must consider," Obi-Wan said. "These files indicate that Zan Arbor is in league with Granta Omega."

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

“Omega!” Anakin exclaimed in surprise.

Siri and Ferus suddenly became grave. They all knew that these two powerful criminal minds could do more than double the damage if they became partners.

Obi-Wan met Siri’s eyes. She nodded.

“We are going to help the resistance,” Obi-Wan said. “We will take the risk. We need to get Zan Arbor off this planet. We only have tomorrow before our cover could be blown. The best chance we have is if she thinks her safety here is compromised. We will offer her a way out. She will have to take it. There is only one thing.”

Siri cocked an eyebrow at him. He noted that she looked her old self, in her tunic and leggings. It was as if the sight of her in her drifting shimmersilk had been an apparition.

“We might not want to take her to the prison planet,” he continued. “If we do it right, she could lead us to Omega himself.”

“We would have to contact Mace,” Siri said.

Obi-Wan nodded. “I think he would agree. I’ll contact him tonight. It will help us if he can start working on Senate approval for us to help the revolt. But it won’t come in time.”

Suddenly, their mission had grown in importance. Granta Omega could be within their grasp again. This time, Obi-Wan would not lose him.

“We can decide where to take Zan Arbor another time,” Obi-Wan said. “But we should all agree that if we can track Omega through her, we will.”

“I agree,” Siri said quietly.

“I do, too,” Anakin said.

Ferus nodded.

“Now let’s all get some sleep,” Obi-Wan said.

Nevertheless, he knew he would not.

Jude Watson

Romin had only one moon, but it was a large, luminous satellite. That night its light seemed enormous to Obi-Wan. It kept him from the sleep he tried vainly to reach.

At last he gave up. He rose from his sleep couch, opened the double doors to the stone patio outside, and walked into the fragrant garden. The air felt heavy. The heat from the day had lingered. Obi-Wan moved among the flowering shrubs. He found the play of moonlight on the glossy leaves more calming than lying on his sleep couch, waiting to feel drowsy. He would let the sights and sounds around him lull him into a kind of relaxation that he hoped would be as restorative as sleep.

He followed a path crowded with bushes that suddenly opened into a small grassy clearing. Ferus sat cross-legged in the middle of the clearing, his eyes closed. Obi-Wan stopped, not wishing to disturb him.

He was turning to go back to the house when Ferus spoke.

"You couldn't sleep either, Master Kenobi?"

Obi-Wan moved forward. He sat on the grass next to Ferus. It was slightly damp and smelled sweet.

"There are many questions on my mind," Obi-Wan said. "Sleep won't come."

"We face a great enemy," Ferus said. "And now we find that she's met with a greater one."

"Exactly."

"And that is why you and my Master made your decision this evening," Ferus said.

"You don't agree," Obi-Wan spoke carefully.

"I don't disagree," Ferus said. "I recognize that I don't have the experience to refute what you say."

Obi-Wan stifled a sigh. He could see why Anakin had a hard time with Ferus. Ferus always said the correct thing. Obi-Wan preferred the spontaneity of his own apprentice.

"I sense your impatience," Ferus went on. "You think I only say the correct thing just to impress you or my Master."

"I don't think that," Obi-Wan said. "Well, not exactly."

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

“Can I help it if the Jedi wisdom I have learned by rote speaks to my heart?” Ferus asked. “I don’t say things because they will please you. I say them because I feel they are true. It’s always been that way, from my earliest memory of the Temple. When I was taught, it was as though I already knew. Every Jedi lesson seemed to fit a groove inside my mind that had already been worn. It was why learning was so easy for me.”

“You have a great connection to the Force,” Obi-Wan said. “No doubt that is why.”

“So does Anakin,” Ferus pointed out. “Far greater than mine. I can see that. Yet he did not have the problems I did at the Temple. He has made great friends there.”

Obi-Wan was surprised. “But you were popular in your class. Everyone looked up to you.”

“Yes, I was the one whom everybody liked, but whom nobody wanted to talk to. I was welcome at every table in the eating areas, but not invited to any particular one. Everyone was my friend, but nobody was my particular friend.” Ferus picked some grass and let it fall idly through his fingers. “I’ve heard the names they call me. A tunic stuffed with feathers and the Force. The ruler of Planet Dull.”

Obi-Wan frowned. He had not known these things.

Ferus waved a hand. “It’s all right. It’s all true, isn’t it? I’ve never been able to joke like the others. I know I can be pompous, too correct. I never learned how to tease the other students. They came to me for help with their studies, they looked to me for answers, but no one wanted to be my friend. Not my true friend, the way Anakin has Tru Veld and Darra.”

Was it a trick of the moonlight, or did Ferus suddenly look younger than his years? Usually, he looked much older. His noble features and the streak of gold in his dark hair had given him a look of maturity early on.

But now he looked uncertain, questioning. Young.

“You will find friendships later in life,” Obi-Wan said, after a pause. “Friendships are hard to maintain for the Jedi. It is why

Jude Watson

we treasure them. Let go of your longing, and what you want will come.”

“Or else I am meant to stay the way I am,” Ferus said. “I wish I had what Anakin has. His connection to the Force is strong, yet he also connects to beings very strongly.”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan agreed. “I’ve seen this. It’s something Qui-Gon Jinn had, too.”

“I know that Anakin will never be my friend. He knows I fear for him. I give him warnings when I know I shouldn’t, when I know it’s none of my business. So he resents me. I thought in the beginning...since I was a little older...that I could tell him things that other students couldn’t. It’s just I see things a fellow student would see.”

Here it was. Ferus had been leading to this. He wanted to tell him something. Obi-Wan felt impatient with him, but he calmed the impulse. He felt protective of Anakin. Ferus didn’t understand him. He had always been the correct student, the one who did everything right. He could not begin to know the fears and regrets Anakin had to deal with.

“And what do you see, Ferus?”

“I fear for him,” Ferus said quietly. “To admire him and feel fear for him at the same time didn’t make sense to me. It took me a long time to understand *why* I feared for him. I wanted to be sure there was no envy in it.”

“Do you envy him?” Obi-Wan asked.

“I suppose all the students do, in a way,” Ferus said. “He is the Chosen One. But what worries me is his will.” Ferus hesitated. “His power is so great that he thinks his judgment is as well. You saw his arguments tonight. He sees something is right, so therefore he must do it. He argues against you without hearing you. He thinks he can change situations, beings. Maybe he can’t do it alone, not yet. But someday he will. Should we trust someone who always believes he speaks with the voice of absolute right?”

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

That is it, Obi-Wan thought. *That is what I see*. What surprised him was that it was coming out of the mouth of one of Anakin's peers, a boy only a year or two older than Anakin, someone who had only been on a couple of missions with him.

Ferus is always watching me, Anakin had told Obi-Wan resentfully.

And so Ferus was. But Ferus's mature judgment surprised Obi-Wan. Surprised him and irritated him, he had to admit. Ferus did not allow for the goodness of Anakin's heart. He did not see how hard Anakin tried. He did not know that Anakin questioned himself all the time.

"You are very observant, Ferus, but you must accept that I know him better than you," Obi-Wan said carefully. "Anakin can be arrogant. I know that. But he is also learning and growing. He is respectful of his great power. He does not abuse it. He is younger than you, but he has seen much injustice, many terrible things. I do not think it so wrong that he wants to change things. You must understand that it isn't ambition that drives him. It is compassion."

Ferus nodded slowly. "I will think about what you said." He stood. "Please know that I say these things only because he is the Chosen One, and the stakes are so high. Good night, Master Kenobi."

"Good night," Obi-Wan said.

He could have said more, but it wasn't appropriate to debate Anakin's character with another apprentice. He would have to sift through Ferus's words and ponder them. He would have to let go of his impulse to protect Anakin and search for the truth in what Ferus had said. Ferus had touched on his own fears, and he needed to think about that.

He breathed in the night air. *Not tonight*, he decided. He valued his new confidence in Anakin. He needed to guard it. He needed to forget what he feared, just for a little while longer. He wanted to treasure what he had.

Chapter Nine

They could see the lights and hear the noise before they even passed through the security check. Teda's villa was ablaze with colored laserlights. Tableaus of different worlds renowned for their natural beauty were arranged on the grounds. Each scene was a small-scale replica of that world's greatest landmarks.

"Dremulae, Off-Canau, Xagobah, Belazura," Ferus said, naming the worlds as they walked by. Native flowers from each of the worlds wafted delicate scents into the air. Servers walked about with repulsorlift trays carrying an array of native foods.

The biggest tableau was for Romin itself. A small-scale replica of Elior had been built out of massed flowers. There were models of Teda Park, the Teda Institute for Advanced Study, and the Roy Teda Colored Fountain of Lights. At the party, the Cloudflower Wall was actually fashioned out of cloudflowers. To reach the Romin display, the guests walked under a large arch upon which laserlights spelled out the message THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WORLD OF ALL WORLDS.

The party was crowded with Romins and others who lived in the palace district, all dressed in their finest. The Jedi had likewise worn the rich robes of the Slams, wanting to blend in. Siri had chosen a shimmersilk sleeveless tunic in colors that shifted from blue to green to silver as she moved, the colors of the sea as the

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

day moved from dawn to twilight. She had refused to wear the matching green slippers, however, pulling on her travel boots instead.

“Just in case I have to run from Teda,” she said.

Obi-Wan felt awkward wearing a heavy septsilk tunic in one of the purple shades that Slam was so fond of. It was heavy and stiff, embroidered with gold thread and tiny jewels. Anakin and Ferus had dressed in less elaborate fashion, pulling on simple tunics in navy and gold.

“The security is tight,” Obi-Wan said as his eyes noted the many agents, some overt and some secret, in the throng.

“Just what we’d expect,” Siri said. “Joylin told us that the door to his study won’t be armed.”

“Let’s hope he’s right. But first, we’d better say hello to our host.”

“Do we have to?” Siri groaned.

It wasn’t easy to find Teda in the crush of the crowd. They bumped into Becka, the officer who had checked them in at the spaceport. He greeted them happily, with a flushed face and outstretched arms.

“My new arrivals! How glad I am that you are here! Have you tried the delicacies from the different worlds? Can I get you a plate of food?”

“We’re looking for Great Leader Teda,” Obi-Wan said. “We’d like to thank him for his hospitality.”

“I saw him in the house,” Becka said. “He checks every detail. How lucky we are to have such a leader! Let me take you to him.”

Becka led them quickly through the throng. The grand palace was decorated as lavishly as the grounds. Banks of flowers were massed in the hallways. Tables with punch and food were set up in every corner. Different bands of musicians played in different rooms, so that the hallways were a mass of noise in which one couldn’t pick out a single tune. It was as though one party wasn’t enough for Teda. He had to pile ten parties on top of one

Jude Watson

another to make one big extravaganza. There was so much food and drink and music and so many flowers that guests lurched about in a daze, as though they were droids with overloaded sensors.

They saw Teda's broad back ahead. Obi-Wan heard his voice above the crowd. He was berating a server in a white tunic.

"You were instructed not to serve the dameapple turnovers until *after* the skewered runis!" he said. He wasn't shouting, but the words were hissed in such white-hot anger that they seemed charged with turbo power.

The server's face now matched his tunic. "I was told in the kitchen—"

With a casualness that shocked Obi-Wan to the core, Teda lifted a small electrojabber and struck a hard blow against the server's knees. The server crumpled, eyes wide. He knew better than to cry out against the pain.

Becka, too, went pale.

"Our leader, so forceful, so strong," he murmured. "How lucky we are to have him." Becka backed away and disappeared into the crowd.

Obi-Wan didn't blame him. In a world ruled by an unpredictable tyrant, citizens had to rely on an instinct for flight to stay healthy.

Teda turned. Obi-Wan was surprised again. There was no sign of anger on his face, just a slight tautness around his mouth. It was as if the rage had never existed.

He held out his arms to the Jedi. "Welcome, Slams! Now the party can begin! Have you eaten? Have you met new friends?" He came forward and put his arms through Obi-Wan's and Siri's. It took an effort for Obi-Wan to allow it. He knew Siri felt the same.

Other servers had rushed to help their fallen comrade. They half carried, half dragged him toward the kitchens.

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

"The theme of the party is paradise," Teda continued. "I've gathered all the best of the galaxy for the citizens of Romin. Even though the best of the best is already here, ha-ha!"

Not all the citizens. Only the ones that you favor, Obi-Wan thought as he said, smiling politely, "Thank you for inviting us."

Teda withdrew his arms from theirs. "Now, don't get stuck talking to an old man like me. Go enjoy yourselves!" He smiled at Siri meaningfully. "I will check on you later."

Teda hurried over to greet some new arrivals.

"I can't believe what I just saw," Ferus said. "He hit that server with an electrojabber with no more emotion than if he were swatting a squeeterfly."

"And you doubt that we are doing the right thing in helping the revolt?" Anakin asked.

Siri changed the subject. "Ferus and I will check out the security on the target," she said.

"I'll check out the perimeter of the palace," Anakin said. "We should map out an escape route just in case. Let's remember: We don't have much time."

That left Obi-Wan without much to do. Joylin had told him that he could not attempt a theft of the codes until after midnight. He had time to kill.

He moved through the crowd, hoping for a glimpse of Jenna Zan Arbor. He didn't know if he would approach her, but he wanted to keep tabs on her, just the same. He wondered what her relations with Teda were. It seemed from the files he'd read that Teda had invited her to come to Romin after she was forced to flee Vanqor. Was there a connection to Omega? Had Omega pressured Teda to invite Zan Arbor?

Obi-Wan drifted toward a table with assorted drinks. He chose a glass of juice made from the native quint-berry fruit of Romin. He took a sip and made a face. It was very sweet.

Joylin had given him explicit instructions on where to find the codes and where the security triggers would be. Joylin was counting on Slam's conning expertise to get past the guards. Obi-

Jude Watson

Wan would simply use the Force. If he was lucky, he could be back in the villa very soon after the theft. But if the revolt really did take place that night, he would go another night without sleep.

Suddenly, his senses went on alert. A young man with a tired, handsome face was heading toward the drinks table.

Obi-Wan knew that face from text docs he had studied. He did not need the Force to warn him.

He looked around. There was nowhere to go.

“Hey, a fellow thirsty traveler,” the man said to Obi-Wan, pouring a glass of juice. “Some party, huh? I’m Slam.”

Chapter Ten

Obi-Wan thought quickly. By the open, unguarded look on Slam's face, he doubted that Slam knew someone was impersonating him.

"I've only just arrived," Slam said in an amiable way, leaning back against the bar and sipping his juice. He made a face. "Whoa, sweet. Just like my landing spot."

"So you like Romin already?" Obi-Wan asked.

Slam gave a half smile. "Let's say it likes me. The rest of the galaxy isn't too...welcoming. Hey, nice tunic."

If Slam had noticed that Obi-Wan hadn't given his name, it clearly didn't concern him. Obi-Wan imagined that in Slam's universe, many beings did not use names or discuss their occupations.

"I just got here yesterday myself," Obi-Wan said.

Slam waved a glass of juice at the throng. "Interesting party."

"Paradise, I hear," Obi-Wan said. "At least, that's the theme."

Slam laughed. "Well, it looks like paradise to me. It was a rough trip for me and my friends."

So his gang is here, too. They must have escaped again. Tyro told us that escapes are common now. I have to warn the others.

Jude Watson

"I'm supposed to meet Teda tonight. And pay the usual bribes, I'm sure things seemed a bit disorganized at the landing platform. They were having trouble with comm transmissions."

Joylin, Obi-Wan realized. They had started to disrupt communications.

"We never got a chance to get our official entry docs," Slam continued. "So, what's the Great Leader like?"

Obi-Wan spoke lightly. "Oh, he's just your average everyday dictator."

"So I hear. But for beings like me, your average everyday dictator comes in handy."

"A word to the wise, though," Obi-Wan said casually. "I wouldn't try to meet him tonight. He's in a bad mood. I just saw him use an electrojabber on a waiter."

Slam winced. "Ouch. Thanks for the tip. Well, I think I'll try the food tables instead, then."

The real Slam moved off.

Obi-Wan glanced at his chrono. He had barely ten minutes before he had to lift the codes. He had to find the others. The party was over for the Jedi.

Ferus spoke quietly, incredulously, to Anakin. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

Anakin gulped. "I think so."

"She's...*flirting*."

"It looks like it."

"She's...*flattering* people."

"Yes."

"And she's...*smiling*."

"It's not just that she's smiling," Anakin added, in the interest of accuracy. "She's *gushing*."

Siri stood in the middle of a group of admirers. Someone had tucked a bright red flower behind one of her ears, and, as Ferus had hissed to Anakin in a fierce undertone, *Siri left it there!* Anakin

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

watched as she placed a hand on a security officer's coat sleeve and leaned over to whisper in his ear. He leaned back and roared with laughter.

Whoever would have believed, Anakin thought in amazement, *that Siri Tachi could be charming?*

It was a night of wonders. His own Master was wearing a cloak with jeweled embroidery and pretending to love parties.

He had to laugh at the look on Ferus's face. After a moment, Ferus broke down and grinned, too. "I think Siri is just pretending to hate this," he said. "I think she's enjoying herself."

"I think you're right," Anakin said. He glanced at his chrono. "We have about seven minutes. We should get into position."

Just as he said it, Siri said one last remark that caused the group of males around her to laugh uproariously. Then she turned away graciously. She joined Anakin and Ferus a moment later.

"I've discovered something," she said. "Charm is exhausting. And something else. Flattery works. I've learned some things. Half the surveillance droids are fakes. Every day more officers are deserting the army. They haven't been paid in months. Teda's running out of wealth. He can't afford to prop up his government much longer, so he's looking for income wherever he can find it. In the meantime, he's cutting back."

"I've found a way out if we have to escape," Anakin said. "It would be difficult, but not impossible. There's a part of the wall that's less heavily guarded. It's behind a dense thicket of bushes with bright flowers and thorns a meter long. We could use the Force to jump over the thicket, then activate cable launchers in midair, scale the wall, and take out droids with our lightsabers as we climb. I'm not sure what we'll find on the other side. Guards are no doubt patrolling outside the palace as well."

"All in all, we just have to hope Obi-Wan doesn't get caught," Siri said.

Jude Watson

"I'll do my best," Obi-Wan said as he came up behind her. "But in the meantime, we have another problem. The Slam gang is here. The real one."

"That's not good news," Siri said. "Does Teda know?"

"Not yet. There's interference in the comm systems. Joylin's work, no doubt. I tried to give Slam a warning about approaching him tonight. But I doubt it will keep them apart for long. Teda is making the rounds."

Siri frowned. "Time just ran out."

"This is all the more reason to help with the revolt," Anakin said. "If it's successful, we won't have to worry about Teda *or* the Slams."

"Still, we can't take a risk for all of us," Obi-Wan said. "This party suddenly got very small. The three of you should head back to the villa and prepare for a quick departure with Zan Arbor. I'll steal the codes, meet up with Joylin, and join you at the villa."

Anakin shook his head. "I'm not leaving you here, Master."

"Yes, you are, because I'm ordering you to," Obi-Wan said. "Remember, my young apprentice. The mission is first."

Obi-Wan put a hand on Anakin's shoulder briefly. The gesture told Anakin that he appreciated his support, but his decision was firm.

But Anakin still didn't want to go.

"Obi-Wan is right," Siri said. "But nevertheless, we are not leaving."

Obi-Wan looked annoyed. "Siri, I don't have time to argue."

"Precisely. You need us to remain. We'll watch out for the Slams. As soon as you get the codes, we'll all go."

"I don't like this," Obi-Wan said.

Siri was adamant. "Too bad."

Only a slight pressing of his lips showed Obi-Wan's displeasure. He turned abruptly and disappeared into the crowd.

Ferus let out a breath. "Whatever happened to flattery to get what you want?"

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

“Flattery doesn’t work on Obi-Wan,” Siri said. “Speaking of which, I’ll track down Teda. I’ll keep him away from the Slams. You two stay close to his office in case Obi-Wan needs you.”

Anakin and Ferus moved off. The crowd was denser now; more beings had arrived. They were louder and giddier. The music was wailing, and some guests were dancing. Anakin could see only bright colors and faces red with a forced gaiety he found distracting. He began to feel an edge of uneasiness. They were risking exposure with every step. His Master was breaking into the secret files of a head of state. And Siri was trying to divert a madman with charm.

Slow down. Breathe. The Force will help you.

“I always hated parties,” Ferus said. “I never knew how to have fun at them.”

Anakin felt his nerves tighten. He saw Obi-Wan approach the two guards at the corridor’s entrance. He waved his hand, and even across the room, Anakin felt the power of the Force.

The guards nodded. Obi-Wan slipped around them and was gone.

“Only a few minutes to go,” Anakin said.

Ferus and Anakin waited. When Obi-Wan appeared in the corridor, they were to approach the guards and use the Force to divert them. Then Obi-Wan could simply walk out with the security codes, and they would leave the party. Simple.

Except it wasn’t. Two minutes later, the security alarm went off.

Chapter Eleven

Obi-Wan couldn't believe it. Of course, he was no criminal mastermind, but he felt he was capable, with the help of the Force, of lifting a file of secure codes in a guarded office. He had missed a silent trigger somewhere, one that Joylin's spy hadn't known about.

Any moment the guards would come pounding in. Obi-Wan drove his impatience with himself out of his mind. It was a distraction. He was only halfway through his task. Alarm or no alarm, he had to complete it.

He entered the security code Joylin had given him. He opened the paneled drawer at the side of the ornate desk Teda used. To his surprise, it was a mess. Durasheets, holobooks, disks, wrappers from some sort of sweet. Some of the sweet had melted and pooled in a sticky mess, gluing the durasheets together.

"Nothing worse than a messy dictator," Obi-Wan murmured. He lifted a red slipcase with a disk inside. Joylin had told him that it was the security codes.

The alarm ringing in his ears, he felt the Force surge as the first sentry droids flew through the door. He vaulted over the desk, lightsaber already activated, and cut them down. Four more flew in, firing in a spinning arc that lit up the room with blaster

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

fire. Obi-Wan deflected the fire and charged toward the door. But before he could reach it, a panel rattled down, blocking his exit. Another slid down over the only window. Obviously the plan was to trap the intruder inside with the lethal droids.

Meanwhile, blaster fire continued to ping in transecting lines that were designed to pinpoint his location and blast him to smithereens. Obi-Wan launched himself at the droids, simultaneously taking out Siri's lightsaber and Force-jumping high overhead to cut them down. By the time the droids lay smoking at his feet, he heard the sound of guards outside the door and shuttered window.

Question. Should he cut a hole in the window or door sheeting and charge out, meeting the blasters head on? Or should he wait for them to enter?

Obi-Wan decided to wait. He would have a few seconds of surprise on his side. They would enter expecting to find him dead or badly wounded.

He backed up against a cabinet, out of immediate sightline of the window and doorway. He pressed back against the cabinet. To his surprise, it moved.

He jumped away as the cabinet wall slid back. Becka stood there. Obi-Wan quickly tucked the lightsabers out of sight.

Becka took in the sight of the smoking droids. "Stars and novas, you're good." He beckoned. "This way."

Obi-Wan hesitated.

"If you go out that window, you'll be met with half the security force. The other half is on the other side of that door. They're waiting for the droids to kill you before they open the panels. You've got about twelve seconds. Do you have the codes?"

"Yes." Obi-Wan leaped into the secret passageway. "I assume you're my spy."

"I work with Joylin. We're going to come out in the hallway near the kitchens. Just stay with me."

"I have to find my gang."

Jude Watson

"I'd say you have to get out of here, but all right. They might lock down the compound once they find the room is empty."

Becka led him through several turnings. They reached a panel outlined in yellow. He pressed a button and the panel slid open.

Obi-Wan found himself in a small closet, crowded with wraps and cloaks.

Becka opened the door slightly. "Go."

Obi-Wan eased out. Becka followed.

The crowd was nervous. Obi-Wan could smell the panic. No doubt a crowd of criminals did not feel secure when a security alarm was going off. Then it stopped abruptly, and the silence was worse.

"False alarm, folks!" Becka called. "Just enjoy yourselves!" He motioned to the musicians. "Great Leader Teda orders you to keep playing!"

The sight of someone in an official uniform had some effect. The musicians began to play, and the guests began to murmur.

"This way." Becka led Obi-Wan down a hallway and then into the great room from another door. He saw Anakin and Ferus, still monitoring the corridor where Obi-Wan had disappeared. Obi-Wan knew his apprentice was close to charging down the corridor after him.

He hurried over. "It's all right. Becka is going to help us. Where is Valadon?"

"She's outside, ready to cover you in case you come out the window."

Becka, Obi-Wan, Anakin, and Ferus hurried outside. Lights illuminated the wall. Droids buzzed overhead.

They saw Siri on the side of the palace, standing just outside the ring of guards surrounding the window. The durasteel panel had risen, and some of the guards had leaped inside the room.

Obi-Wan sent out a call to Siri, using the Force. She turned and saw him. He saw the relief on her face. She started toward him.

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

Becka was watching the placement of the guards carefully. Suddenly, a group of them turned and started toward the gates. Lights began to blink rhythmically on the top of the wall.

“Not good,” Becka said. “They’re going into lockdown.”

Obi-Wan looked around. “Any ideas?”

“I scouted out the back wall,” Anakin said. “I think we can make it.”

“I don’t think you should try it,” Becka said. “If they see you, it will just make things harder. Security will be looking for you until they catch you. Leave this to me. All we need is a little panic for cover.”

The crowd was on the edge of panic already. They didn’t know what was going on. Security guards were now storming through the place, checking ID docs. Flocks of sentry droids buzzed overhead. The sumptuous party had turned into a replica of a prison—a place nobody at the party was particularly interested in revisiting.

“Just wait here for a moment,” Becka said.

He went from group to group, speaking quietly. As soon as he left them, the groups talked among themselves, and then to others. Soon, voices began to rise.

“This is outrageous!”

“I will not be detained!”

“I came to this planet for security and peace....”

Becka reappeared at Obi-Wan’s side. “Just walk out with the others.”

“No one is leaving.”

“You lead the way. The guests will follow. I’ve told them that Teda is keeping them indefinitely for interrogation. They are furious and afraid. Teda will have to let you leave. He depends on their bribes to survive. He won’t stop them. You’ll see. Go.”

Siri looked at Obi-Wan and shrugged. “Worth a try.”

Obi-Wan drew his cloak around him. “I for one won’t stand for this,” he said loudly. “I’m leaving!”

“Yes, let’s leave immediately,” Siri agreed.

Jude Watson

Heads turned. As Obi-Wan and Siri stalked off, followed by Anakin and Ferus, some of the braver guests followed. At first it was a trickle, then a wave.

Everything happened as Becka said it would. The crowd approached the nervous security guards at the gate. They drew their blasters but did not fire them as Obi-Wan and Siri continued to stride ahead. One officer spoke quickly into a comlink. Obviously, he was contacting Teda.

In just seconds, the security gates opened. Teda could not compromise his treasury by angering those who propped up his regime.

So Obi-Wan and the Jedi left the palace compound in a fashion they hadn't suspected when they'd arrived—leading a large group of angry criminals straight out the front gates.

Joylin was waiting for the Jedi in the prearranged spot, in a narrow alley behind the exclusive shops on the boulevard.

"Heard you had a rough time," Joylin said.

Obi-Wan handed him the codes.

Joylin quickly accessed the small disk and scanned its contents. "It's all worth it." He looked up. "Our operatives are in place. We're going to hit the security center first and knock out the CIP. Then we'll take over the rest."

"Remember," Obi-Wan said, "we want Zan Arbor."

Joylin nodded. "Part of the deal. We won't go back on it. We'll contact you at dawn and you'll tell us how you want to proceed. Your ship will be fueled and you'll have permission to leave, if that's what you want. We have plans to confiscate all other transports, so you'll be the only ones allowed to get off-planet."

Obi-Wan nodded. Good. That way, the Slams would be Zan Arbor's only choice.

"Until then, my suggestion is for you to go back to your villa and lie low. Things are going to get worse before they get better."

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

“I thought you said this would be a bloodless revolution,” Ferus said.

“I said I *intended* it to be,” Joylin said. “I still do.” He looked overhead. Sentry droids were beginning to patrol the streets, sweeping dark areas with panels of light. “Now I’d better knock out that CIP.”

He turned and disappeared down the dark alley. Obi-Wan and Siri exchanged a worried look. They had rarely seen a government takeover that was easy or bloodless.

Yet all they could do was wait.

Chapter Twelve

The Jedi did not take Joylin's advice and return to the villa. They remained on the streets to monitor the progress of the revolt, keeping concealed.

Sentry droids were so thick in the air that a constant humming noise filled the streets. Teda's government was on full alert after the theft in his office.

They knew the instant the CIP had been hit. The sentry droids crashed to the ground, lifeless.

Within minutes, however, the army flooded the streets. The Jedi retreated before them as they headed for Cloudflower Wall, trying to quell the resistance.

They arrived just in time to see the Romin workers burst through the security gates. The mass of beings was like a huge moving mountain. The Jedi were now swept along as the determined group marched toward Teda's palace, pushing the army back in a hard battle.

Obi-Wan had hoped to see joy and liberation on this dark night. Instead, he saw only rage. Sick at heart, the Jedi watched as the looting and violence began. The Romins had been deprived of too much for too long. They had lived with fear as a constant companion. They had watched their children suffer.

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

The anger fed on itself and grew. They wanted to destroy what had destroyed them.

Transparisteel shattered. Monuments fell. Even trees were hacked down. Fires were lit in the exclusive shops, the businesses that catered to the wealthy, the banks, the assembly halls, even the hospitals. Citizens who had profited from the Teda regime were dragged into the streets and slaughtered.

The Jedi could not be everywhere. It all got out of control too fast.

Siri and Obi-Wan were shaken. They had taken the risk. They had hoped for the best and seen the worst.

Obi-Wan saw the horror through Ferus's eyes. Siri's apprentice grew silent. Obi-Wan saw him shudder as he saw the things he had feared would happen.

"We did this," Ferus said.

"No," Anakin said. "*They* are doing this."

"We have to help," Ferus insisted.

"We'll help where we can," Siri told him. "We can't stop it, Ferus."

They found cowering workers and brought them to shelter. They tended to the wounded and prevented violence where they could.

The night stretched on. The sounds of destruction grew soft as the Romins raged in other parts of the city. They heard the muffled thuds of explosions. The crash of transparisteel. The far-off noise of an alarm. A cry that could have been a bird. But they knew it was not.

By dawn the Jedi had established their villa as an outpost that they guarded from the mob and used to monitor Zan Arbor's villa, which seemed untouched so far. As long as she remained there, Obi-Wan was content to do likewise. Scores of Romin citizens sat in their garden, refugees from homes that had been looted and burned. The Jedi could not begin to sort out who had been involved in Teda's government and who had merely lived

Jude Watson

and worked in the city. They allowed anyone fleeing to come in and take shelter.

The rising sun brought a kind of calm to the streets. The resistance workers patrolled now, trying to restore order. Obi-Wan and Anakin sat outside, ready for trouble, though they had received no threat for hours now.

“A long night,” Anakin said.

“Yes.”

“Even after this night, I still think we weren’t wrong.”

Obi-Wan sighed. He tried to smooth the trampled grass underneath his hand. “Wrong or right—I’m not ready to make that call. We made the decision using the facts we had.”

“But we were right,” Anakin insisted.

Obi-Wan saw the will Ferus had been talking about, the need to bend the situation to Anakin’s own vision of it. The need to be right.

“Anakin, sometimes sureness is not what you should strive for. A little confusion in your mind can be a good thing. Will we be proved right ultimately? I hope so. Did we do the best we could? Yes. That I firmly believe. That’s enough for now.”

Siri called them from the villa. “The vidscreen is broadcasting. The resistance now has control of the communication system. Joylin is going to speak.”

Obi-Wan and Anakin hurried inside. Siri, Ferus, and some of the refugees were crowded around the vidscreen. Others began to pour through the doors, and still others stood outside the windows so that they could hear.

Joylin appeared on the screen. Even on vidscreen, his magnetism was clear. His clothes were stained and rumpled. His face was drawn. Yet strength radiated out from his body, and his eyes were resolute.

“Romin is now in the hands of its people,” he said.

A sound rose from the crowd, half gasp, half cry. No one had liked living under Teda. Yet the liberators had come close to destroying the city. How safe were they?

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

“The Citizens’ Resistance is now occupying the palace of the tyrant Teda as well as the government buildings. We have control of communications and transportation. Order has been returned to the streets. Some regrettable looting and burning has occurred, but it has been stopped. No one will be granted exit from Romin without the permission of the Citizens’ Resistance. The army of the Great Leader has deserted or joined us. Let us rejoice, citizens, in our victory. Our tyrant is finished.”

A woman standing next to Obi-Wan began to weep. A man turned away, his hand at his mouth.

“Although we begin today as the first day of a government of justice and peace, the tyrant who abused our trust, our people, our wealth, our cities, our lands, is still at large. He has fled, like the coward he is.”

Obi-Wan and Siri exchanged a glance. So it was not over, then. As long as Teda remained at large, the resistance’s hold on the government was shaky at best.

“Teda has fled along with the few who continue to support him. Among them are his chief of staff, General Yubicon, and the galactic criminal Jenna Zan Arbor.”

Anakin punched the wall with his fist. It was a rare display of anger. Zan Arbor had slipped through their fingers again.

“Teda is now a wanted criminal. We hereby charge him with crimes against Romin. And so we announce this. We hold the rest of his senior staff and government officials in custody. If Teda does not surrender to us, we will execute them. One by one.”

Joylin stared into the camera. His eyes were burning. “Watching, caring, protecting. Roy Teda loves his people. Prove to us you are not a monster. Save those who were loyal to you. And meet the justice of the people you claim to love. We await your surrender. The first execution will take place in one hour. Your first aide, Hansel, will be the first to die.”

The screen went to static.

Jude Watson

Ferus looked at Obi-Wan. His face was white. He shook his head and turned away.

All night Obi-Wan had consoled himself with the thought that things had to get better with the dawn. Instead, things had gotten worse, more horribly than he could have imagined.

Chapter Thirteen

Obi-Wan was happy to shed the fine robes of Slam. Siri bundled up her shimmersilk dress, now stained and torn, and threw it away.

"I'm glad to be a Jedi again," she said.

Leaving Anakin and Ferus in charge, they hurried down the deserted streets toward Teda's palace.

"It's not that I'm surprised at what has happened," Obi-Wan told Siri. "It's just that I had hoped for better."

"It is always better to prepare for the worst," Siri said. "I'm glad we contacted Master Windu before the revolt."

"It will still take some time for the Jedi re-enforcements to reach us," Obi-Wan said. "Mace said he would come personally. I don't imagine he'll be in the best of moods. He wasn't happy about this plan from the beginning."

"Neither was Ferus," Siri said. "He was right about the revolt. It got out of control too easily. He thinks if we hadn't helped, maybe they would have postponed the revolt. Maybe Teda would have fallen without being pushed. I tell myself that he doesn't have the experience to realize that sometimes you have to make a hard decision and accept the consequences. And then I think...what if he was right?"

Jude Watson

"If he was right, then we were wrong," Obi-Wan said. "That's all. Do you think the Jedi are always right?"

Siri sighed. "Sometimes you sound so much like Qui-Gon."

"After all these years, finally a compliment," Obi-Wan said.

He was glad to see that the remark lightened Siri's expression. "Don't let it go to your head," she growled.

"Ferus is wise beyond his years," Obi-Wan went on. "He thinks deeply. But even though an outcome may seem likely, sometimes one has to risk for the right result."

"Yes, Ferus is reluctant to risk too much. Not like Anakin," Siri said. "He's willing to risk everything."

She meant it as a compliment, Obi-Wan knew. Siri admired Anakin's daring, his sureness, how fluidly he used the Force. It was unusual for Siri to second-guess a decision, just like Anakin. In some ways, Obi-Wan was more like Ferus. How odd that he and Anakin had become a team. Their temperaments were so different.

Choose the Master, the Padawan does.

Yoda had said that to him many times, from when he himself was an apprentice. The old Jedi Master believed in most cases that the Force drew the Master and his apprentice together for reasons they couldn't see themselves. Obi-Wan felt strongly that this was true.

Joylin must have been waiting for them, because his security guards let them through without a problem. A tall guard led them to Teda's inner office, where Obi-Wan had stolen the codes. On the way, they saw resistance members wandering about the palace, staring at the fine things. Many had pulled colorful cloaks and tunics over their own threadbare attire. Obviously, they had raided the palace closets. The remnants of the grand party still lay about, food half-eaten on plates, musical instruments abandoned, drinks spilled. There was a strange energy here. The people seemed dazed rather than energized.

Obi-Wan and Siri walked into the inner office. Joylin had cleared out most of the fine furniture and rolled up the rug.

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

Along with an assistant, he was methodically going through Teda's datafiles.

"I have enough here to convict him on state crimes ten times over, and I've only just begun an hour ago," Joylin said. In person, Obi-Wan could see both fatigue and triumph on his face. Joylin didn't look at them, but spoke as he flipped through files. "I suppose you heard about Zan Arbor. She escaped with Teda. Believe me, we tried to trail them. I don't know yet how they got away. Or where they are. Her ship was destroyed when the rioters hit the landing platform. Don't worry—I was able to stop them before they destroyed your ship. I even had it refueled for you."

Joylin looked up at last. "I did what I could. I assume you came for the last half of your payment."

"We don't care about the payment," Obi-Wan said. "We'll give you back what you paid us already. Put it toward restoring the hospital."

For the first time, Joylin seemed to notice the difference in their appearance.

"Who are you?" he asked. His eyes narrowed.

"We are Jedi," Obi-Wan said. "We have the authority of the Senate."

"We've come about the executions you plan," Siri said. "You cannot do this."

Joylin's skin seemed to tighten over his bones. "I am the leader of Romin. I can do anything I want."

"That tone is familiar," Obi-Wan said. "Recognize it, Joylin?"

"I am not Teda," Joylin said. He shook his head at them. "How dare you," he continued softly. "You arrived on my world two days ago. You've seen nothing. You know nothing. You have not seen the prisons, filled to overflowing with those who Teda felt threatened by, filled with those who *displeased* him. You have not seen even one corner of the misery he has caused."

"This does not justify murder," Siri said. "You are judge, jury, and executioner for these people. That goes against galactic law."

Jude Watson

"They are all murderers!" Joylin exclaimed. "Don't you understand? If Teda is allowed to go free, we will never be safe. Our movement will collapse. We don't know how many of the army deserted or how many went with him. If I don't do this, we could lose control of the government!"

"Delay," Obi-Wan said. "The Jedi can help you. More are arriving."

"I did not call for the Jedi."

"I did," Obi-Wan said. "The Senate has approved."

Joylin stood. "This is my world," he said, his voice steely. "I have worked and sacrificed for twenty years to stand here. I will not risk the collapse of a government by the people."

"Excuse me," Obi-Wan replied. "From where we are standing, it appears that you *are* the government."

Joylin planted his fists on the desk and leaned forward. His face was composed, but his eyes shone bright and hostile.

"Your interference is unwelcome. I have nothing more to say. Go, or I'll have you thrown out."

Obi-Wan was perfectly aware that no one in the palace had the power to throw them out. Yet a battle now would do no good. He and Siri turned and walked out.

On the way back to the villa, they talked over what to do next. It was clear that they had antagonized Joylin. They didn't know how much longer he would allow them to remain on Romin. That didn't mean they had to leave. It would just make things more difficult.

"I think our best bet is to find Teda," Obi-Wan said. "If Zan Arbor is with him, it will solve two of our problems."

"Agreed," Siri said. "But where can we look where Joylin's people haven't already?"

They walked past the gates of the villa. Ferus hurried toward them.

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

“We just received a message,” he said. “It’s from Teda and Zan Arbor. They request a meeting with the Slams. And since the revolt took place before the real Slams met Teda, that’s us.”

Chapter Fourteen

Teda and Zan Arbor were at a safe house well outside the city. The Jedi borrowed a Gian airspeeder from one of the refugees they'd taken in. The house was in a forest so densely wooded that they had to abandon the speeder and hike in to the prearranged coordinates. They were met by General Yubicon, Teda's chief of staff.

"It's just a quarter kilometer this way," he said.

Anakin could tell that the general led them in a way designed to confuse them. He did not realize he was dealing with Jedi. Anakin knew he could find his way back easily.

They came to a small clearing. The house in front of them was made of prefabricated plasteel materials so it could be dismantled and moved quickly. That must have been Teda's secret. His safe house never stayed in the same place.

Guards encircled the house. Anakin knew more were positioned in the woods. He couldn't see them, but he knew they were there. Obviously, Teda had retained at least part of his army.

A guard at the door ushered them in. They were expected.

The house was tiny compared to the palace, but it was not rustic. It was furnished sparsely but lavishly, with plush seating and thick rugs. The rooms flowed into each other, forming a

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

square around a central courtyard that was open to the sky. They were led to the courtyard, where they found Teda and Jenna Zan Arbor waiting for them.

Teda seemed a bit shaken, but Zan Arbor was composed. Not a hair of her perfect coiffure was out of place. Wearing his mask once more, Anakin kept to the rear with Ferus as Obi-Wan and Siri moved forward. As one of the lesser members of the Slam gang, he hoped to escape Zan Arbor's notice completely. He still remembered the intense focus she had given him as she questioned him about the Force. He wasn't afraid of her, but he wouldn't mind staying out of her way.

As Anakin expected, Teda and Zan Arbor were totally focused on Siri and Obi-Wan, the leaders of the gang. The Jedi had changed back into their Slam wardrobes. Siri was wearing another revealing robe, this time in a pale pink. She had complained about having to don her attire again, but you'd never know it now by the way she drifted forward and let her hand rest in Teda's in greeting. You'd never suspect that she held the leader in contempt as she smiled, turned so that her skirt flared out, and settled herself in a chair, coyly crossing her legs. Obi-Wan, too, managed to continue his part of the farce, smiling graciously as he sat to the sound of his jingling robes.

"Thank you for coming," Teda said. "Of course you realize that this so-called revolt of the people is a temporary situation only. It will all go away, I assure you."

"But that is not why you are here," Zan Arbor said, obviously bored by the subject of the revolt. "You came to me yesterday and offered me a chance to join you in an enterprise. Unfortunately, I had to refuse you. Now I ask for the chance to tempt you instead."

Obi-Wan tilted his head. "I'll try to forgive you for refusing me. Please continue."

Siri gave Teda a glance through her eyelashes. "I love to be tempted."

Jude Watson

Zan Arbor looked annoyed at Siri's flirtatiousness. "Teda and I have been working together on a certain enterprise—"

"Excuse me," Teda said. "But I haven't lost my title, you know."

Out of Teda's sight line, Zan Arbor rolled her eyes. "*Great Leader* Teda and I are partners together in an enterprise. Because of the sudden, surprising nature of the revolt, even though there was enough warning if you were clever enough to catch it, and the complete inability of Romin's supposedly great army to retaliate—"

Interesting, Anakin thought. *Zan Arbor isn't afraid of Teda in the least. She's taunting him, right to his face. And he's taking it.*

"—we find ourselves in a situation in which we are in need of your help. Thus we are able to offer you a chance to join with us. In short, we need false text docs, very complete, which I understand is your specialty."

"That would not be a problem," Obi-Wan said. "We just need access to our ship and our files. Our ship has survived the revolt, I'm happy to say."

"Mine did not," Zan Arbor said, flicking an angry gaze at Teda. "It was a Luxe Flightwing. Completely destroyed."

"Ah. So you are stranded on Romin." Obi-Wan clucked his tongue. "How unfortunate."

"Naturally, we will pay you your normal fee," Teda said.

"Or a little more," Obi-Wan said with a grin. "Considering the circumstances."

Zan Arbor nodded, an acceptance of Obi-Wan's point that they had no one else to turn to. "We also need your heist skills for a particular job. Or rather, this is not just a job. It's an opportunity to change your lives. The scope of it means that if we are successful, you can retire and live very well for the rest of your lives."

"We already live well," Siri pointed out.

"You will live better," Zan Arbor snapped.

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

“And you will not be a fugitive,” Teda said in a voice like honey. “You will have plenty of systems to choose from to live in.” He winked at Siri. “Just tell me where you choose, so I can visit.”

“In other words, you are in the right place at the right time, for once,” Zan Arbor said. “You have a chance to change your destiny as small-time crooks.”

“Jenna, Jenna,” Teda chided. “You are talking about the Slams. They are brilliant masterminds.”

Zan Arbor waved a hand. “I mean no disrespect. I speak the truth. I am offering them something they would never be able to contemplate by themselves. Slam, even though you lie for a living, you should respect that I won’t lie to you. Now, where is your ship?”

“It’s at the main landing platform. Fueled and ready.”

“Good. So, are you in?”

“Whoa, let’s pull back on the throttle a bit. I haven’t heard enough yet,” Obi-Wan said. Anakin knew what his Master was thinking. He had to get more information, information that Zan Arbor and Teda wouldn’t want to part with. This must be the scheme that Zan Arbor was working on with Granta Omega.

“We’re intrigued,” Siri chimed in. “We need a few more details. What is the nature of the job?”

“You don’t need to know that yet,” Zan Arbor said.

“Are you well financed?” Obi-Wan asked.

“That is not a problem,” Zan Arbor assured him.

“Do you have other partners?” Obi-Wan asked.

“One other,” Zan Arbor said reluctantly.

Siri fixed her blue gaze on Teda. “I hope that this partner’s stature is as great as yours. Though I can’t imagine it.”

“It is,” Teda boasted, before Zan Arbor could stop him. “He is the most powerful business power in the galaxy. He—”

“That is enough,” Zan Arbor interrupted. She turned to Obi-Wan. “Now, our first step is to get off-planet. We must get to your vehicle.”

Jude Watson

"Have you heard Joylin's ultimatum?" Obi-Wan asked Teda. "He is threatening to execute your loyal officers. Hansel is the first."

"I heard. Oh, poor Hansel. I feel so very badly for him," Teda said with a sigh. He rubbed his hands together. "Now, are you sure you have enough fuel? We are traveling to the Core, to Coruscant."

"Coruscant?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Teda, be quiet," Zan Arbor snapped, her voice hard. "Who is your text doc expert?" she asked Obi-Wan.

"Waldo," Obi-Wan said, indicating Anakin.

Zan Arbor turned. The sun came out from behind a cloud, and Anakin felt suddenly exposed in the bright light, even with his headgear disguise.

A long moment ticked by. Anakin felt uncomfortably warm. The Force suddenly surged. A warning.

"I know you," she said.

"I don't believe so."

"We have crossed paths."

"Perhaps," Obi-Wan said. "We've traveled widely."

"Joylin has closed down the spaceport, but we have received permission to leave," Siri interrupted. "However, we must do it within the hour. Can you be ready?"

"I am ready now," Zan Arbor said. Her attention slid away from Anakin. There were more pressing matters to deal with.

"Then let us go," Obi-Wan said.

There was a commotion outside. Teda leaped to his feet, a blaster in his hand. The Jedi turned.

The real Slam and the rest of his gang burst into the courtyard. Slam pointed a finger at Obi-Wan.

"Impostors!" he cried.

Chapter Fifteen

Teda looked alarmed, but Zan Arbor suddenly smiled, as if she had just figured something out. She turned back to Anakin.

“Jedi,” she said. “Now I remember.”

Now Teda looked panicky. “Jedi?”

She rose and drew closer to Anakin, ignoring the Slams and the other Jedi. “Good disguise. But it isn’t your face that beings remember. It’s your manner. Your power. The way you move. I remembered you after our visit together on Vanqor. I asked about you. Teda, don’t you admire me for recognizing that this scruffy prisoner, one among so many, was different? You’re Anakin Skywalker.”

She gazed at him with a hungry expression. Anakin felt unnerved.

“I have studied the Force for so long,” she murmured. “Never did I expect such a prize.”

“I’m not your prize,” he spat out.

“Well, you’re my prisoner, and that’s the same thing. Do you know how many guards are surrounding you right now?”

Obi-Wan shot Anakin a look. The Jedi could fight. They could escape. But Obi-Wan was telling him to wait. They had more to discover. The stakes were too high.

Jude Watson

"We can take them to the prison and have them executed on the spot," Teda said.

"Don't be so hasty," Zan Arbor said.

"Look, you don't have to kill them," Slam said, looking uneasy now. "Just tell them to stop impersonating us."

Valadon, as tall as Siri and as blond, shot her an icy look. "And give us our clothes back."

Zan Arbor had not taken her eyes off Anakin. "Do you know what we have here, Teda?"

"Yes," he moaned. "A big headache."

"Leverage. Remember our discussion before? If we bring a great prize to our partner, he will look at us differently. We can negotiate a different split."

"What are you talking about, Jenna?" Teda asked impatiently. "Prizes? Leverage? Please remember I am a ruling ruler who was just kicked out of his palace. I'm not in the best of moods!"

"The Chosen One," Zan Arbor said softly to Anakin, so that no one else could hear. "I was told about you. My interest in the Force is deep. Enough to know how your destiny is your burden. Do you remember the Zone of Self-Containment? I can bring that back to you."

He remembered feeling content, a contentment without a tether to sadness or guilt. There was just the sun and serenity, a serenity he had never achieved as a Jedi. The Jedi had promised him that, and it had not happened. Perhaps it never would.

"Ah," she said softly, "speaking of temptation..."

He pulled off the mask. There was no need for it now. "I'm not tempted by you," he responded.

"I saw how you enjoyed it," she said. "I can make all your burdens disappear."

"My only burden at the moment is having to talk to you," Anakin shot back.

She smiled. Anakin could see that once, before evil had twisted her, she had been seductive. Her smile was lush, appreciative, inviting.

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

"You remind me of someone I knew a long time ago," she said.

Obi-Wan overheard that. "Qui-Gon Jinn," he said.

Zan Arbor whirled around. She walked closer to Obi-Wan. "Do I know you?"

"Obi-Wan Kenobi."

She laughed in delight. "Obi-Wan! But you were just a boy! You've grown up well," she said, appraising him. "I heard Qui-Gon died on Naboo. And Yaddle has recently 'joined the Force,' hasn't she—a Jedi Council member? It makes you think, doesn't it?" She shook her head. "What is happening to the Jedi? Their strength diminishing, their best leaders struck down. And yet they don't see that they are declining. Such a pity to watch. So intriguing to study."

Anakin saw Siri's eyes flash. She did not speak. He knew from experience that she did not spar with villains. She just waited her turn. She was absolutely certain at all times that she would prevail in the end. He liked that certainty. He held an image in his mind of Zan Arbor back on a prison world while he, Obi-Wan, Siri, and Ferus watched her being led away. He needed to hold on to that vision.

"Jenna, we need to plan a plan," Teda said irritably.

"Oh, Roy, relax," Zan Arbor said. She waved at the tea table, indicating the Slams. "Slam, Valadon, have some refreshment. We need to talk. You are going to transport us off the planet—don't worry, we know where your transport is—and we have a proposition for you that the Jedi have already accepted on your behalf."

Easygoing as always, Slam pulled a chair up to the table and poured himself some tea. "This is sounding more promising. How happy I am that your messengers found me."

"Meanwhile," Zan Arbor said, "Teda, call the rest of your guards—and I mean all of them. I want General Yubicon in charge."

"But he's my personal bodyguard now!"

Jude Watson

“Oh, don’t be such a baby. I am tired of your whining.” She turned to the Jedi. “They have superior weaponry, I assure you. And if you don’t want anyone else harmed, you’ll do best to comply.” She gave a pointed look at the Slams. It was clear she would sacrifice them if the Jedi did not cooperate.

The guards moved closer. Teda spoke into a comlink and they heard the humming of swoops as more guards took to the air. They hovered above the courtyard. Anakin saw blaster rifles pointed at them—and Slam, Valadon, and the other members of the gang.

“Your lightsabers,” Zan Arbor said. “Give them to General Yubicon.”

Obi-Wan slipped his and Siri’s lightsabers out of his belt and handed them over. Ferus and Anakin followed. Anakin knew his Master would never hand over his lightsaber unless he was fully intending to get it back shortly.

“Put the lightsabers in the prison vault,” Zan Arbor ordered the general. “I’ll want to study them. Put the prisoners in the holding cell for now and have them guarded severely. We’ll pick them up as soon as we finish here.” She leveled her icy gaze on General Yubicon. “Don’t let them out of your sight, don’t listen to them, and don’t make any mistakes. Go.”

General Yubicon’s eyes flickered as he stuffed the lightsabers into a satchel that he slung on his back. Anakin could see that he did not like taking orders from Zan Arbor. Teda didn’t say a word. Anakin realized who was truly in charge. Zan Arbor had Teda under her thumb.

Slam cocked his head at them. “Sorry. I didn’t mean for it to go quite this far. But all’s fair.”

“That’s very true,” Obi-Wan said. “If you join up with these two, you’ll get what you deserve.”

The Jedi were roughly herded out of the house and pushed along a rutted road that ran through woods with branches so thick with dark green leaves that they blotted out the sun completely.

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

They were marched farther down the path—playing along for now, waiting for the right moment to turn the tables. The area felt desolate and dank. Over the thump of footsteps and the buzzing of the swoops overhead, Anakin saw General Yubicon speaking to his assistant as they walked. He called on the Force to help him tune out the noises around him and focus on what the officer was saying.

“...thought we had a strong leader, but he is just as much a sham as they say he is. Am I supposed to pledge my loyalty now to Great Leader Zan Arbor?”

“What can you do?” the other officer asked in disgust. “One day we’re living in a palace in Romin, the next in the middle of a swamp. It’s enough to make me join the resistance.”

“And what would the resistance do to you if they found you?” the first officer said. “Look what they’re doing to poor Hansel. Listen, we’re safer with Teda. Or at least I thought so. Now I suspect that Zan Arbor is planning to take off with him and without us. Teda said he would take his first officers, but will she let him? They’re planning something big. Teda said they will have the Senate to do their bidding.”

The Senate? Anakin gave a quick glance at Obi-Wan. He could tell his Master was listening, as well.

“Here we are,” the other officer said. “Mind yourself. The prisoners know something is up, somehow. They’re restless. Not to mention starving.”

“Just be glad you’re not in their place,” General Yubicon said.

The prison rose ahead, long and low, built of dark green duracrete so that it would not be visible from above or from the road. The resistance had not gotten here yet. The Jedi passed through energy gates and into the compound. A door rose into the ceiling to admit them.

The inside of the prison stank of dirt and rot. There were no windows. A security console ran along a blank wall. Droids that had not been affected by the revolt in the city sat monitoring the

Jude Watson

equipment. Their sensors flashed green as General Yubicon entered.

Energy cages hung suspended from the ceiling. The walls and floors were stained with dark matter. Desperation and pain seemed to be as much a part of this structure as durasteel and duracrete.

Obi-Wan looked at Anakin.

Not yet, but soon.

The guards flooded in behind them. Now they would not have to deal with the swoops overhead.

The guards opened a second door, which also rose vertically. Behind an energy fence was an enormous cell. It was stuffed full of beings and aliens from many worlds. Most of them wore rags and were barefoot. They eyed the guards with hatred. Some of them looked cheered at the prospect of breaking in new prisoners.

“When, Master?” Anakin asked urgently.

“It seems to me,” Ferus said politely, “that now would be an extremely good time.”

“Okay,” Obi-Wan said. “Now.”

The four Jedi moved as one. There were twenty-two army officers in the prison and five prison droids within their sight. No doubt more droids were in the inner rooms of the prison. But now was as good a time as any to attack.

Obi-Wan, Ferus, and Anakin went for the officers, using the Force to push the first line with such power that they bowled over their fellow officers. Blaster shots went wild and pinged on the prison walls. Siri whirled and kicked General Yubicon in the chest, knocking him backward. His head hit the duracrete floor, knocking him out with the stunned expression still on his face. She leaned over, deftly plucked the lightsabers from the satchel, and tossed them to the Jedi.

Anakin leaped above the guards. He grabbed the bottom of an energy cage and flipped himself in a midair somersault, then landed behind them. From there it was easy to simply disarm two

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

officers before they had a chance to turn around. Without their weapons, the guards turned, looked at General Yubicon on the floor, and simply ran out.

Lightsabers blazing, the Jedi advanced through the rest of the officers and droids, deflecting fire. Behind them, the prisoners roared approval.

Then Anakin heard a voice above the rest, coming from the holding cell. The prisoners were shouting, and it took him a moment to make out the words. "The stun nets!"

More guards flooded the main room, stun net launchers in hand. They didn't care that they would snare other guards. They let loose the nets with their electrical charges. The nets hung in the air for a split second. In a blink of an eye they would blanket the room.

In that split second Anakin made his calculations. He knew if they were hit with the nets, the paralyzing charges could hamper them. The nets would ensnare them, and every time they moved, sensors would deliver another paralyzing charge. Better to avoid them completely then slash away with their lightsabers. The nets wouldn't stop them, but they would slow them down.

He stepped forward before the others could move. He held up a hand. He felt the Force in the room. Could he do it? He reached out with his mind, gathering in the Force. He thought of his lessons with Soara Antana. Everything in the prison became fluid to him. It was easy to move, easy to manipulate.

Using the Force, he flipped each of the nets backward and onto the guards.

The guards fell, shouting and kicking. Within moments, they were still, unwilling to cause another charge to jolt them.

The prisoners sent up a roar.

Suddenly, the prison wall began to glow. A red line appeared on the wall, moving upward quickly.

"The army must be outside," Obi-Wan said. "They're using laser artillery. Watch out...the wall is going to come down!"

Jude Watson

They leaped backward as the entire entry wall suddenly fell with a crash, exposing the prison to the woods beyond.

Then they got the bad news. Outside was an entire battalion of soldiers.

“Surrender!” an amplified voice cried.

“Let us out!” one of the prisoners cried. “Let us fight!”

Obi-Wan leaped over and deactivated the energy fence. The prisoners rushed out, grabbing blaster rifles and stun batons from the fallen guards.

“We can do it. Just give us a chance.” A short Romin in a tattered tunic stood next to Obi-Wan, a blaster in his fist.

“We didn’t free you to see you slaughtered,” Obi-Wan said. “That’s an army out there. With grenade mortars and missile tubes.”

“Surrender or die!” the voice repeated.

Anakin looked at the prisoners. Their faces were grim. They were ready to face whatever came.

“Do what you want,” the prisoner said. “We’ve been inside too long. We won’t surrender.”

“We can win, Master,” Anakin urged.

“There has to be a weapons room,” Obi-Wan said rapidly to Anakin. “Go with Ferus. Bring back what you find.”

Anakin motioned to Ferus, and they leaped over the guards in the stun nets and ran down the hall. It wasn’t hard to find the weapons room. They found blaster rifles and more stun net launchers. The prisoners crowded in with them, quickly grabbing blaster rifles and stun batons. Anakin picked up a flamethrower. Then he and Ferus hurried back to Obi-Wan and Siri with the stun nets.

“They’re re-forming their battle line,” Obi-Wan said. “They want to risk as few soldiers as possible. These stun nets can come in handy. But they don’t have much range.”

“You wouldn’t have to worry about range from a swoop,” Ferus said. “There are some outside the front door.”

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

“You’ll get blasted into the sky if you stick a toe out there,” Obi-Wan said.

“Cover me,” Ferus said.

Anakin would have just run. But Ferus waited to get Siri’s nod. He dashed toward the front of the building.

“Anakin, use that flamethrower launcher,” Obi-Wan said. “Don’t hit the front line. Just keep it moving along so they back up. Try to drive them between those trees so that Ferus can drop the nets. Siri, come on.”

Anakin powered up the flamethrower while Siri and Obi-Wan ran out. The army began to fire. Using wrist rockets and small missiles, the army tried to advance, as Anakin concentrated the flamethrower on the center of the line.

Siri and Obi-Wan Force-jumped past the flames, aiming their lightsabers at the weapons the troops had left behind as they hurried to escape.

Ferus flew overhead, piloting the swoop with one hand on the bars, using his knees to steer. With astonishing speed, he activated the net launchers, one after the other, and tossed them over the front lines.

The soldiers fell, and the others behind were confused. They looked to their captain, but he had been diverted and was ordering the others to put out the fire that had started in the brush. Smoke began to roll over the soldiers, making them cough.

Obi-Wan looked back at the prisoners. He held up a hand. “Now!” he shouted.

With a cry, the prisoners surged forward. The Jedi had succeeded in confusing and disorienting the army. But it had not vanquished them. Mortar fire pounded and blaster fire shuddered. The Jedi moved, leading the charge, deflecting fire when they could and Force-pushing the troops away.

Anakin felt his blood pumping with the challenge of facing an army. He felt certain of victory, yet he also saw that it would be difficult. Obi-Wan had been right. What kind of a victory would

Jude Watson

they have if the prisoners were slaughtered? They were falling around him, no matter how quickly he moved, no matter how many missile launchers he took out. There were too few Jedi and too many weapons.

Just then, a sleek cruiser glowed red in the sky. It dropped down like a stone to a perfect landing, like a feather on a blade of grass. Anakin felt a surge of relief. There were only two or three Jedi he knew who could land a plane like that. He was one of them. Another was Garen Muln, Obi-Wan's old friend.

The ramp slid down. Mace Windu, Bant Aerin, and Garen Muln charged down the ramp. Their lightsabers were a blur as they moved through the troops.

The Force was strong now, compounded by them all fighting at the peak of concentration. They joined together, strategically targeting the army so that they separated divisions from each other and knocked out the leaders who tried to organize.

Within a short time, the tide of the battle turned. When the captain of the troops found himself facing the Jedi personally, he laid down his weapon and surrendered.

When the rest of the army threw down their weapons, Anakin could almost hear the sighs of relief. Everyone was tired of fighting. Everyone just wanted to go home.

Chapter Sixteen

“Rescuing you is becoming a habit,” Garen said to Obi-Wan.

Bant smiled her shy smile. “This time I came along for the ride.”

Obi-Wan put his hands on her shoulders. He did not say a word. They smiled at each other. He hadn’t seen Bant in three years. They had worked out a system of communication, however. Whenever one of them was at the Temple, they would leave the other a message or a small gift. A river stone, a sweet, a dried flower, an odd turn of phrase they had learned in a new language, written on a folded durasheet and tied with a bit of fabric. So Obi-Wan had continued to feel her gentle presence in his life. But seeing her was better.

“If you two wouldn’t mind curtailing the reunion, I’d like a status report.” Mace’s voice was dry. It was clear that he wasn’t very happy about having to disrupt his schedule to fly to Romin.

“First of all, the real Slam gang is on Romin,” Obi-Wan said.

“I know,” Mace replied. “Apparently they bribed the director of the prison.”

“Teda and Zan Arbor are scheming to get off-planet,” Siri said. “They’re going to try to use the Slams’ ship. Joylin is still in power. The first execution is scheduled to take place in...about fifteen minutes.”

Jude Watson

“Then I think our first task is to demonstrate to Great Leader Teda the necessity of his surrender,” Mace said.

They caught Zan Arbor and Teda as Teda was attempting to start an airspeeder piled high with cases and boxes. Garen landed the transport directly in front of them.

“Do it!” Zan Arbor was shouting.

“I’m usually *driven*,” Teda said. “I don’t usually *drive*.”

“For galaxy’s sake, let me drive!” Zan Arbor yelled.

Mace Windu swept up and buried his lightsaber in the airspeeder’s engine, effectively cutting off power in one stroke. “Don’t worry. You can ride with us.”

Zan Arbor’s lips were white. Fury was evident in the strained muscles of her neck. Her veins protruded like ropes. “Jedi,” she spat out.

“What did you do to my army?” Teda asked. “No one is answering my communications. You can’t interfere with a sovereign power!”

“What’s left of your army has been destroyed and your commander has surrendered,” Mace said. “And I’m afraid I *do* have the authority to interfere. I am here on behalf of the Senate to negotiate the terms of your surrender.”

“I will never surrender!” Teda cried.

Zan Arbor began to climb out of the airspeeder. “I’m not part of this, so I think I’ll—”

Mace Windu held his blazing lightsaber centimeters from her face. “I think,” he said softly, “you’ll do as you’re told.”

Zan Arbor backed up and sat on the edge of the airspeeder.

“Now,” Mace Windu said, “where are the Slams?”

“How should we know?” Zan Arbor said sulkily.

“My guess is that they’ve gone to get their ship,” Siri said. “No doubt they have plans to meet and transport Zan Arbor and Teda off-planet.”

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” Mace Windu said. “We’re going to escort you to the headquarters of the new government of Romin.”

“You mean bring me to my own palace?” Teda asked with a sneer. “So I can negotiate with thieves and murderers? Is that what the Senate sanctions these days?”

“The Senate is supporting this revolt on the basis of your many crimes against your own citizens,” Mace thundered. “You are lucky the Jedi are here to ensure you won’t be torn limb from limb. Now let’s go.”

Joylin was sitting with his closest allies eating a large meal in the dining area when the Jedi arrived with Teda and Zan Arbor in tow. He pushed away his food and stood.

“So, you came,” he said, looking at Teda with hatred. “Not by choice, I see. Typical of your cowardice.”

Teda looked at the meal. “That’s my food!”

“It is the food of the citizens of Romin.”

Zan Arbor rolled her eyes. “Ah, democracy,” she sneered.

“Here is what the Senate requires,” Mace said. “No executions may take place. Trials must be held, evidence gathered. You cannot begin a new government using the tactics of the one you overthrew. Surely you can see that.”

Joylin said nothing. He stared with hatred at Teda.

“Give the order to stop the execution,” Mace said.

Joylin did not move.

“The Jedi have destroyed Teda’s army,” Mace said. “Would you like us to do the same to yours?”

Ferus spoke. “Senate support will be crucial in building your new world,” he said to Joylin. “You have done so much. Your vision deserves the best chance to flourish.”

Joylin turned. He blinked at Ferus, as though he had been disturbed out of a deep sleep. “Yes,” he said. He picked up his comlink. “Stop the execution. Teda has surrendered.”

Jude Watson

"I hope you won't be putting me with the others," Teda said. "I wouldn't think they'd be very...pleased to see me."

"I think it's the perfect place for you," Joylin said. "Guards!"

The guards led Teda and Zan Arbor away. Joylin leaned over to speak to an aide on the other side of the room.

"I feel sorrow that lives were lost, but the outcome is good," Mace said to the Jedi. "This change on Romin will make a better world."

He turned to Ferus. "You spoke well just now. You allowed Joylin to make his decision and save face in front of his supporters."

"There is a bit of pride mixed in with his politics," Ferus said.

"Ferus showed a greater grasp of this situation than we did," Siri said lightly. "He predicted a chaotic takeover. He said that Joylin would surprise us, and he was right."

"Good, Ferus. We need to anticipate problems," Mace said.

Obi-Wan noted that Anakin looked unhappy. Mace had singled Ferus out for praise. He moved closer to his Padawan.

"I am proud of you," he said. "You fought well, with compassion and precision."

But Anakin was not listening.

Something was wrong.

Chapter Seventeen

Anakin hung back, watching Joylin carefully. He knew the Force was helping him, he knew that this sudden power was a new side of the Force that he hadn't yet tapped, and he was filled with a sudden sense of exultation. He had even more power than he knew. Suddenly, he saw into the heart of Joylin. He did not see just what Joylin wanted them to see, or didn't care if they saw, but the most secret part of him. Joylin suddenly looked so small. He was such easy prey.

I didn't know this, Anakin thought. The Force isn't just about manipulating objects. I can manipulate beings, too. I can use their fears and secrets.

"You did it," he said to Joylin. "You let him go."

The Jedi turned to look at him, surprised.

"Those guards aren't taking Teda to prison. You never wanted him to surrender," Anakin said. "You knew he was too much of a coward to do so. You just gave him the ultimatum so you would have an excuse to execute all his loyal followers. You were afraid if they survived they would build a power base and ultimately destroy you. You knew that Teda was nothing without them, that he wasn't capable of running a government. He's just a figurehead. You don't fear him, so you don't need him dead. You just need him gone. So if someone like Zan Arbor pays you

Jude Watson

enough, you'll allow him to escape. She made the deal with you at the beginning of the revolt, didn't she?"

The Jedi turned back to Joylin. His angry silence told them everything.

"Where are they?" Mace asked.

"I'd guess Teda and Zan Arbor are heading for the Slams' ship," Anakin said. "And I would also guess that the Slams have permission to leave Romin, no matter what Joylin has told us. He has kept the permission order for the Slams to leave in place despite the lock-down."

"Withdraw that permission," Mace ordered.

"It is too late," Joylin replied.

With a withering look of contempt at Joylin, Mace led the Jedi out of the room.

They rushed to the landing platform, zooming up in one of the turbolifts. When they reached the top, the Jedi quickly hid behind a gravsled stacked with equipment. They could see the Slams readying the ship for departure. Through a windscreen, Anakin saw a blond head.

"They are still here," Mace said. "Excellent work, Anakin. Let's go."

"Wait." Obi-Wan's tone was sharp, and Mace turned, surprised. He was rarely told to wait.

"We should let them go," Obi-Wan said. "This is our chance. They are on their way to Granta Omega. It's the only way we can find him. If we can get a tracking device aboard, we'll have him."

"Obi-Wan, we have Zan Arbor here, now," Mace said. "She is capable of doing great harm to many. Are you willing to risk letting her go for the sake of Granta Omega?"

"I feel strongly that we must," Obi-Wan said. "Omega is the bigger threat."

Ferus bit his lip, looking from Obi-Wan to Mace. Anakin waited, his hand on his lightsaber.

Siri's eyes blazed in agreement. "Obi-Wan is right. Ferus and I are ready to join them on this mission," she told Mace.

STAR WARS: The Changing of the Guard

"I do not know that you're correct," Mace said. "A position I find myself in all too often these days. If you feel strongly, Obi-Wan, I support your decision. But everything depends on getting that tracking device on the ship without being seen."

Obi-Wan turned to Anakin with such confidence, such assurance, that Anakin felt he would never forget this moment. Trust lay between them, unbreakable.

"Anakin?"

"I will do it, Master."

He took a tracking device out of his utility belt and stood. Keeping behind the supplies, the gravsleds, and fueling trucks, he slid in as close as he dared. He would have to choose his moment. A moment when no one aboard would be looking.

The Force. He could use it. He wasn't sure how. But he reached out for it and gathered it, formed it to his pleasure, to what he needed.

The engines fired. He was close enough to feel their heat. *Now.*

The ship rose, just a meter above the ground, hovering for the few crucial seconds needed to input coordinates and information. With the help of the Force, those seconds spun out into more time, enough time for him.

Anakin used the Force to jump straight toward the exhaust, where no viewscreens could see him. The temperature was blazing hot, too hot for a living being to stand, yet he stood it and it did not burn him. He was close to the edge of the landing platform here. He timed the move as the ship rose. With a grunt and a call to the Force for help, he tossed the tracking device as the ship lifted. He saw it catch on the underside. When the ship rotated, Anakin was already back behind the fuel pump, jumping down perfectly with not a millimeter to spare.

The Slams' ship shot out of sight.

Anakin rose. His legs felt slightly shaky at the dangerous maneuver. His skin felt hot, but he knew he wasn't burned. Mace and the others walked toward him.

Jude Watson

Mace looked at him, his dark eyes raking him. "Impressive."

"Are you hurt?" Obi-Wan asked him. "I didn't mean for you to jump into the ship's exhaust funnels."

"I'm not hurt."

Mace looked up at the vapor trail the ship had left. "I hope we made the right decision," he said. "Are you ready to track them?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. "Granta has always been one step ahead of us. He has always planned our meetings. Now I will decide how we next meet."

"May the Force be with you." Mace started away.

"Uh, Master Windu?" Obi-Wan said. Mace turned and gave him an impatient look.

"Just one more thing," Obi-Wan continued. "We need your ship."

Siri sat at the controls. They had been traveling for days now, following the pulse of the tracking device. The Slams' ship was heading into the vast empty space of the Outer Rim.

Ferus had stretched out on his sleep couch. He would take the next piloting shift. Obi-Wan sat at the table in the eating area. He had spread out a number of holofiles, information about Granta Omega gathered by Archivist Jocasta Nu at the Temple. Obi-Wan knew the information by heart, but he still didn't believe it was possible to study it too deeply.

Anakin sat, staring out the viewscreen at the stars. He was in a place of deep quiet, not meditation, exactly, but open to the galaxy, to the energy that boiled from stars and worlds, satellites, matter and nonmatter, gravity, inertia, living beings.

Suddenly, he sat erect. Every muscle tensed.

Obi-Wan looked up. "What is it?"

Anakin turned to him.

"Omega. He knows we are coming."

Book Nine
The False Peace

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JEDI QUEST

BY JUDE WATSON

THE FALSE PEACE



Chapter One

He had chased after one man for years. He had found him. He had fought him. He had lost him and found him again. Each time, he had vowed that this encounter would be their last.

This time was no different. Obi-Wan Kenobi wanted a showdown with Granta Omega. Once and for all, he wanted to put a stop to a criminal he knew was dedicated to bringing down the Jedi Order. Deep in his heart, he knew the showdown was near.

But he also suspected that, like the others, it would not come in a manner of his own choosing.

Obi-Wan strode through the busy streets of the capital city of Falleen, Anakin Skywalker by his side. Siri Tachi and her apprentice, Ferus Olin, were only a step behind. They had landed on the planet only the day before. Obi-Wan was grateful to his friend Siri. She had pledged to help him bring Omega to justice, and so far she had traveled halfway around the galaxy, fought an army, and worn a dress in order to do it.

Now he felt responsible for her impatience. Siri believed that problems were solved by vivid action. If there was one thing she avoided, it was uncertainty.

Obi-Wan wasn't crazy about it, either. They couldn't pinpoint Omega's location. Instead, they had to randomly search for clues

Jude Watson

to his whereabouts. They knew he was on Falleen. But they did not know where, or why.

He wished he did not have the feeling that Omega was always one step ahead. He wished that in his mind, the same scenario did not constantly revolve: He would burst into an empty room just in time to see a transport take off. Omega would have escaped again.

Obi-Wan glanced at his apprentice. He knew Anakin had no such doubts. Anakin did not consider the possibility of failure. He was not haunted by his defeats.

Other things haunted his Padawan. Things too deep for Anakin to share at one time.

Yet they worked so perfectly together now. Thoughts and feelings were shared, sometimes without speaking. There were times when Obi-Wan thought that the shadow he sensed within Anakin was gone. That the struggle to accept his role as the Chosen One had been conquered. That Anakin was at ease with where he was, and the gifts that had been given him. Obi-Wan hoped that was the case. Anakin had shared his feelings with his Master—and the release had changed him.

The Jedi moved carefully through the streets, staying in the middle of the crowds. They were dressed as space travelers, and they were careful not to attract attention. The walkways of the city were filled with beings from many worlds. The city was built on three levels, and every café, hostel, and multi-residence was packed.

Factories on Falleen were booming, and more were being built every day. In a quick survey, the Jedi had learned that most of the factories manufactured weapons. Jobs and opportunities were plentiful. Visitors from star systems all over the galaxy flocked to the small planet to make their fortunes.

But if the booming capital city made it easy for the Jedi to hide, it also made it easy for Granta Omega to conceal his activities. They had learned on the planet Romin that Omega was in league with the criminal scientist Jenna Zan Arbor. She had

STAR WARS: The False Peace

developed a secret drug, called the Zone of Self-Containment, which could make beings feel blissfully, if dangerously, content, leading them to forget their cares, or any need for taking action. They knew that she had not yet learned how to transmit the Zone to more than a few individuals at a time. Anakin himself had been under its influence for a short while.

The two criminals, along with the former dictator of Romin, Roy Teda, had plans to pull off a major criminal operation. The Jedi suspected they planned to use the Zone to do it. Zan Arbor had enlisted the help of a criminal gang, the Slams, to help them.

The Jedi knew that much. But that wasn't enough.

They had followed Zan Arbor and Teda here, but Omega had managed to hide them well. So far they had kept a low profile and traveled through the streets and cafés, attempting to pick up some word about the criminals' whereabouts. There was plenty of talk swirling about the best factories to work in, and who was hiring. Obi-Wan had contacted the Jedi Temple with the names of various corporations that owned factories on Falleen, but it would take some time before they could discover if any had ties to Omega. Weapons merchants often hid ownership of companies behind other companies, so that it was hard to trace who exactly owned what.

Which is exactly what Omega counts on, Obi-Wan thought.

"I've never seen this much security on a peaceful planet," Anakin remarked, adjusting his hood as he walked.

It was true. Surveillance droids were everywhere. "They aren't all official security droids," Obi-Wan observed. He had studied the various droids over the past few hours, cataloging them in his mind. "As a matter of fact, most of them seem to be private droids. And they're armed."

"Omega?" Siri asked. Her blue eyes were keen. "Looking for us, perhaps?"

"Just as we are looking for him," Ferus Olin said. "So we're even."

Jude Watson

“Any ideas, Master?” Anakin asked him in a low tone. They had been walking through the streets for some time.

“That new factory we’ve heard of—Blackwater Systems,” Obi-Wan said. “Let’s head there. It was built quickly and already has a bad reputation among the Falleens. There are rumors that bribes were paid to the government to keep away inspectors.”

The factories were built just beyond the outskirts of the city. The Jedi hopped aboard a cloud bus to take them, blending in with the other passengers. They exited at the last stop.

Here the three grand pedestrian levels were narrow and squashed together, one on top of the other, so that a tall species would have trouble on the lower ones. Large factory complexes were built on ground level and rose into the sky. They knew that at night the factories belched their toxins into the sky. The Falleens called this area the Yellow District because a constant haze of that color hung in the sky.

The Jedi were now alone here on upper walkway, underneath the yellow sky. This was not an area anyone would stroll in, and it was in the middle of a factory shift, so the workers were inside. The Blackwater Factory was at the end of the long line, more than two kilometers from the last cloud-bus stop. It was colder here. The wind howled off the vast plains outside the city and carried a special bite, tasting of the vast ice sheets from the distant mountains.

The Blackwater Factory rose in their vision as they approached. It was windowless and completely fashioned from black durasteel and stone. One main building hulked on the site, with a wing flung out from one side like a useless arm.

As he drew his cloak around him, Obi-Wan suddenly tensed. He saw one surveillance droid zoom into his line of vision. Another followed. These did not seem to be moving aimlessly. The Force surged to warn him.

“We’re being tracked,” he said to the others. “Move normally. Could be routine.”

STAR WARS: The False Peace

“Up ahead,” Siri remarked, casually swinging her arms as she walked.

Ahead, a narrow alley led diagonally off the main walkway, running along the side of the main building. As they passed they darted inside and began to run. The droids would have to double back, and those few seconds could make a difference. The Jedi turned a corner, then another. They could sense rather than see that the droids were still in pursuit, but hadn’t been able to get a fix on them. The alley was narrow and twisted around, connecting the factory to various smaller outbuildings.

“What now?” Ferus asked. His voice was steady, even though he was running hard. Siri’s Padawan did not have Anakin’s great Force connection, but he made up for it with excellent physical training and a keen mind.

Anakin’s head cocked. “I hear something. This way.”

Following Anakin now, they ran through the maze. They passed gravsleds and durasteel bins marked as waste. They didn’t see any tiny creatures or birds here. No living thing would linger in this place if it didn’t have to.

Their race ended at a tall stone wall. Anakin stopped. Now the others could hear what he had detected so many twists and turns before. A crowd was on the other side of the wall.

The Jedi activated their cable launchers. Quickly they scaled the wall. The crowd was just ahead, focusing on a female Falleen who was speaking. Her voice rolled over the crowd.

They jumped down and quickly moved into the crowd for concealment. The two teams had doubled back during their run and were now standing outside the main gate of the factory. The Falleen female stood, hanging on to the gate with one hand to keep herself above the crowd while she spoke into a voice amplifier headset. She was tall for the species, with the distinctive gray-green color to her scales.

“...and we ask them, what are the wastes you produce, and what is your disposal system? And they tell us—”

“NOTHING,” the crowd shouted.

Jude Watson

“And we ask them, what is the nature of the experiments you are conducting in your secret wing? And they tell us—”

“NOTHING!”

“And we ask them, what about the four workers over the past three months who have died without any reports being filed? And they tell us—”

“NOTHING!”

“And we ask them, when you have your products and your profits, what will you do for the citizens of Falleen? And we know the answer, don’t we?”

“NOTHING!” The crowd screamed the word.

“And will we do nothing, or will we demand what is our right to demand—a full accounting of what is made here?” the female Falleen shouted. “If our leaders will not make them obey our laws, we must! Are you with me?”

“YES!” the crowd shouted.

“Are you willing?”

“YES!”

“Are you ready to go in and find what we need?”

“YES!”

“Then come on!”

A small explosive charge went off. The Falleen female leaped to the ground. At first Obi-Wan thought she’d been hurt, but then it was obvious that she or one of her cohorts had set it off, for the gates swung open. With a cry, the crowd surged forward.

“We shouldn’t be in the middle of this,” Ferus said.

Anakin looked fascinated.

It didn’t matter if they should be there; they were caught. The crowd was ahead of them and behind them now. As it moved, they moved with it. And then ahead, Obi-Wan saw black objects fly out from the factory.

“Attack droids,” he shouted. “Take cover!”

The crowd panicked and moved backward like one great breaking wave. Then they turned and ran, back toward the

STAR WARS: The False Peace

walkways. The Jedi fought their way through the crowd, moving against them, toward the droids.

Obi-Wan watched the Falleen female. As soon as the droids had come, she had dropped from the gate. Instead of fleeing with the others, she ran along the outside of the gate. He knew she was heading toward the alleys. He saw her make a turn. In that direction, she would run straight into a wall.

Two of the droids peeled off and followed her.

“Anakin!” Obi-Wan called. “Let’s go.”

Chapter Two

Anakin had seen the same thing as his Master, and he read Obi-Wan's intention before it was fully formed. They needed to talk to the Falleen. Anakin looked around quickly. There was no one in sight, and no danger of blowing their cover.

He charged toward the droids, leaping and slashing, his lightsaber moving so fast that it was back in his belt before he hit the ground. The two droids lay in smoking ruin.

Grinning, Obi-Wan kept pace with him. "Nice work."

"Don't mention it."

Siri and Ferus joined them. Racing now, the four Jedi turned a corner and saw the female Falleen futilely trying to scale the wall. She whirled and tensed when she heard their footsteps.

"We're not with Blackwater," Obi-Wan said quickly. "We were in the crowd."

She nodded. "I'm afraid we're trapped."

"The droids tracking you crashed into each other," Siri told her. "They're destroyed."

"There will be others," the Falleen said. "The factory owners have my vitals. They can track me. If I were you, I wouldn't stick with me. I'm afraid my back is literally to the wall."

Anakin admired her bravery. She spoke coolly, but he could feel that inside she was terrified.

STAR WARS: The False Peace

“The wall,” Obi-Wan said, “is not a problem.”

He strode forward and attached one end of his cable launcher to the Falleen’s utility belt. “Always be prepared,” he said. His tone was light, and Anakin knew he was trying to reassure her.

The Jedi moved forward. In a few seconds, they had activated their launchers and swung up and over the wall, Obi-Wan keeping the Falleen steady as they climbed. They dropped down on the other side.

The Falleen looked around. “I know a back way to the cloud-bus stop from here,” she said. “I’m Mazara, by the way.”

She gazed at them curiously.

“We arrived on Falleen recently,” Siri said. “Looking for jobs.”

“We’d better hurry,” Obi-Wan said. “It won’t take them long to look further.”

Mazara took them on a different path through the maze of alleys that ran behind the factories. They had to scale the locked gates between the properties, but they saw no new evidence of tracking droids.

Mazara waved at the surrounding plains as she walked. “This is why Falleen is so ideal for them,” she told them. “There is plenty of land outside our city. Transports can land and take off without being logged in. Waste can be dumped or offloaded onto orbiting platforms.” Her voice was full of disgust. “Not to mention that as Falleen, we don’t like to raise our voices. The population is growing distressed with the situation, but no one says anything. It is not ‘appropriate,’” she said, giving a wry twist to the word. “Believe me, I’m not an activist. I was a journalist, before I got fired for writing an article on Blackwater. Both our land and our skies are becoming dumping grounds. I’ve seen it happen to other worlds. I can’t watch it happen to my homeworld.”

“Why did you target Blackwater Systems?” Obi-Wan asked.

“They are the worst offenders,” Mazara answered. “The factory was built quickly, with little regard for basic safety

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practices. Enormous bribes were paid to inspectors to overlook violations that are part of the laws of Falleen. There have been several deaths at the facility and each time an investigation is done the result is the same—the worker was at fault.”

“Do you know who the owners are?”

Mazara sighed. “It is the usual game of company behind company. But this muddle seems murkier than most. I’ve been investigating almost since they arrived, and I don’t have any answers. What I do know is that their security is extraordinary. Those attack droids are programmed to shoot blaster fire. Not to stun, to kill.”

Suddenly Mazara stopped and gave them a shrewd look. “Attack droids don’t usually crash into each other.”

“Yes, it’s an unusual sight,” Siri said.

She looked at them carefully. “I’ve traveled widely. I’ve seen enough to know you aren’t workers. You took those droids down, didn’t you?”

The Jedi said nothing, but Mazara nodded, as though they had confirmed her guess.

“You are Jedi,” she said.

“Why do you say that?” Obi-Wan asked.

“There is word on the street that those who identify Jedi will be paid for it,” she said. “Don’t worry, you can trust me. What are you doing on Falleen? Have you come to help us?”

“We’ve come to investigate several of your factories,” Siri said carefully.

“That will help us, no matter what your purpose,” Mazara said. “You can take word of what is happening back to the Galactic Senate.”

Anakin exchanged a quick glance with Obi-Wan. He knew that like him, his Master had his doubts that the Senate would be able to stop what was going on here. The Senate was roiled with its own problems as the new movement of Separatists was fraying old loyalties and creating new alliances. Very little

STAR WARS: The False Peace

legislation was being enacted, and petitions for help from many worlds were delayed by procedure.

“Have you heard of someone called Granta Omega?” Obi-Wan asked casually.

Mazara shook her head.

“How about Roy Teda?”

“Yes, of course, the deposed dictator of Romin. He’s here.” Mazara grimaced. “Falleen seems to attract the worst of the galaxy, these days.”

“Do you know where he is?” Siri asked.

“Of course. He’s staying in the kind of reclusive hotel reserved for the ultra-rich. I learned about it back in my investigative days.”

“Is he staying with anyone else?”

Mazara shook her head. “Not that I know of.”

Obi-Wan glanced at Siri. Roy Teda and Zan Arbor had split up, most likely.

“You said that there were deaths at the Blackwater facility,” Ferus pointed out.

Mazara nodded. “And rumors of sicknesses that cannot be diagnosed. Rumors that Falleen are forced to work in water tunnels. We are able to stay underwater for long periods of time.”

“Water tunnels?” Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin felt a surge of excitement. So they were on the right track after all. They knew that Zan Arbor was trying to perfect the transmission of her Zone of Self-Containment through water.

“That wing of the factory is restricted. It’s set up for transmission experiments,” Mazara said. “Workers are forced to sign a statement of confidentiality, and so far, no one has dared to contest it. The penalties are unknown, but they must be severe.”

“We would like to examine that wing,” Obi-Wan said. “Can you get us inside the factory?”

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“That is easy,” Mazara said. “There are Falleen in the employment office who will help us. I can get you inside as workers. After that, the rest is up to you.”

Chapter Three

Mazara was as good as her word. She arranged an interview for Obi-Wan and Anakin that she promised would be a mere formality. Meanwhile, Siri and Ferus decided to stake out the exclusive hotel where Teda was staying and see what they could learn.

The four Jedi split up in the early morning. Their breath clouded from the cold air as they paused in the main square of the city to say good-bye.

“So how come I get to freeze on a factory floor while you hang around a luxury hotel?” Anakin grumbled good-naturedly to Ferus.

Ferus grinned. “Just lucky, I guess.”

Obi-Wan was glad to see the ease between them. Ferus had unburdened himself on Romin and spoken to Obi-Wan of his fears about Anakin. Obi-Wan had been both irritated and alarmed by Ferus’s insights. But it was as though passing along his worries had freed Ferus to unbend around Anakin. As a result, the tension between the two Padawans had lessened considerably.

“May the Force be with you,” Siri told them.

Obi-Wan and Anakin headed off to join the river of workers crowding aboard cloud buses for the journey out to the Yellow

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District. They rode to the end of the line, then hiked the remaining distance. The other workers were silent, their faces gray and composed. The long, hard day lay in front of them.

Obi-Wan and Anakin went directly to the employment office. There, no questions were asked and they were given passes to the main factory floor by the employment officer, a Falleen named Wanuri.

“We are interested in working in the transmission wing,” Obi-Wan told Wanuri as the Falleen pushed two security swipe cards across the desk to them.

Wanuri shook his head. “Can’t do it, even for Mazara. Word has come down that no more workers are needed there. The night shift has been canceled, so everyone will be leaving exactly at six. The last hire always sweeps the factory floor. Be sure and lock the hydromop and repulsorbroom back in the utility closet. Here’s the card. Be sure not to stay. Two security officers and droids make a sweep of the factory every fifteen minutes.”

He pushed the card across the table. Obi-Wan pocketed it.

“Great,” Anakin murmured as they headed to the factory floor. “Not only do we have to work all day, we have to clean up afterward.”

“He gave us the job as a way to stay behind,” Obi-Wan told Anakin. “We can hide somewhere until everyone leaves. He also told us how security is handled.”

Obi-Wan and Anakin clipped the swipe cards to the front of their red unisuits, the uniform of the workers. They were given a manager to report to. He split them up into two different areas of the factory.

Obi-Wan took his place in a line of workers who were checking levels on machines that monitored the injection of liquid into small canisters. He could only assume that the Zone was packaged somehow within the canisters, but he didn’t know if it was liquid or gas or some kind of suspended particles.

He was surprised at how disorganized the factory floor was. It was hard to tell what, exactly, was being manufactured. Each part

STAR WARS: The False Peace

of the factory was sealed off from the next, and Obi-Wan had no idea where the final product was being assembled.

Deep troughs were cut in the factory floor for the waste, which was simply flushed down through the floors to outflow valves. If a worker stepped or fell into the trough by accident, he or she was coated in waste material. There was no way to know if the material was toxic. Unlike other factories, there were no decontamination rooms.

The work wasn't hard, just grindingly dull. The workers were used as a double-check to the machines, which rarely made errors.

The interesting thing to Obi-Wan was that supervision was light. A tier ran around the upper level of the vast space, where managers were supposed to monitor the workers below. But he noted that the managers rarely looked down. They were more concerned with eating, drinking tea, and joking with one another. There seemed to be no central authority making sure everything was getting done.

This worried Obi-Wan. It wasn't like either Omega or Zan Arbor to run a slipshod organization. Was he in the wrong place?

He confided his doubts to Anakin at the break. Anakin nodded.

"I've noticed the same thing, Master. My work partner said the managers all changed two weeks ago. The workers haven't had to work as hard. They're all relieved."

But Obi-Wan wasn't. He was uneasy.

"We're wasting time if this factory isn't preparing the Zone for use," Obi-Wan said.

"We'll find out tonight," Anakin said.

But would it be too late? Obi-Wan couldn't shake his uneasiness.

The rest of the day passed in repetition and drudgery. The workers were bored and worked at half speed, and none of the managers cared.

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Before the end of the workday, Obi-Wan reported to the manager in order to clean the factory floor. Together with Anakin, they swept and mopped. There was no one to oversee them or make certain they did a good job. When the buzzer sounded, signaling the end of the workday, Obi-Wan and Anakin headed to a utility closet. They placed the repulsorbroom and hyrdomop inside. With a quick glance to make sure no one was watching, they ducked inside the closet, too.

The noises of the departing workers faded. They heard a lone security guard make his rounds. Then everything shut down at once. They heard the locks slam home on the doors outside. The tiny light in the closet shut off.

They waited a few minutes, listening intently for any movement outside the door. Then Obi-Wan opened the door carefully. They quickly moved down the hallway and peeked out on to the factory floor. The machines looked like sleeping creatures in the dim light.

"We have about eleven minutes before the droid sweep," Obi-Wan murmured. "Let's head for the wing."

They ran down the aisle, keeping an eye out for the security guard. They hurried to the door that led to the restricted wing.

Now they were faced with a double-coded lock.

"Our swipe card will work if we can override the code," Obi-Wan said. "We don't want to tip anyone off that we were here."

He worked at the keypad for several minutes.

"Master, the droid sweep."

Frustrated, Obi-Wan tried another combination. He had studied codes at the Temple with the great Jedi Master Nan Latourain, but this code was proving too difficult for him.

"Master!"

Obi-Wan jumped away as he heard the *whirr* of the droids. He and Anakin hid behind a gravsled as the droids swept by, their surveillance unit revolving steadily. As soon as they were gone, the Jedi re-emerged.

Obi-Wan attacked the keypad again.

STAR WARS: The False Peace

“Let me try,” Anakin suggested.

Obi-Wan stepped aside. He watched Anakin work. He felt Anakin call upon the Force. The Force grew around them, pulsing and shimmering, but the Force could not unlock keypads.

“We’re stuck,” Anakin said. “There has to be another way.”

Obi-Wan felt the same uneasiness, the same sense of urgency, he had felt earlier today.

Suddenly in his mind, he saw Qui-Gon Jinn’s easy smile.

You know the answer. Why don’t you trust it?

Obi-Wan withdrew his lightsaber and slashed through the lock in one motion. The door swung open.

“Well, that’s one way,” Anakin commented.

They found themselves in a short hallway with another security door. Obi-Wan didn’t hesitate this time, but buried his lightsaber in the durasteel. It peeled away in a glowing arc of light and smoke.

They hurried through. They were now in a large room that served as a laboratory. Anakin quickly headed to the console, where he thought the files might be kept. Obi-Wan made a survey of the room.

“There are valves here that go to tunnels,” he told Anakin. “Big enough to walk in. I suspect that despite the laws, they experimented on the workers themselves.”

“They did,” Anakin said, reading from the files. “Different levels of the Zone. The four worker deaths were from overexposure. They were trying to calibrate exact amounts for large crowds. Thousands at once. This factory is definitely Omega’s. Zan Arbor can’t be far off.”

Obi-Wan strode over to read over Anakin’s shoulder.

“Zan Arbor had already perfected one-on-one transmission,” Obi-Wan said. “But this indicates she’s searching for a way to infect a whole city.”

“So we were right,” Anakin said. “The proof is in these files.”

Obi-Wan pointed to the bottom of the file.

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TRACK A EXPERIMENT VOIDED.

TRACK B EXPERIMENT BEGUN.

"Track A and Track B? I wonder what that means," he said.

"This science is over my head," Anakin said, flipping through the holofile. "We'll have to get inspectors in."

"We have enough evidence to go straight to the Supreme Chancellor," Obi-Wan said. "That's the only way things get done, these days."

Anakin looked at his chrono. "We have another six minutes before the next droid sweep."

"Let's check out the tunnel."

Quickly they opened the valve and stepped inside the tunnel. They walked down, using their glow rods for illumination. Vents were spaced evenly on the tunnel walls, and the plastoid sides were smooth.

Obi-Wan stepped over to the side and peered into a vent. "I see some ducts and hoses. This must be how the Zone is administered," he said. He stepped away to study a schematic drawing that was light-lasered onto the wall. Tunnels branched out from the main tunnel, and it appeared to be an extensive system.

"The tunnels go on for whole kilometers," Obi-Wan said, surprised. "Enough to approximate an entire small city, right here in the factory. This tunnel dips underground and joins the main system. It connects to other smaller tunnels...."

Anakin cocked his head. "Master..."

"It's so detailed. I wonder if it's based on an actual city system...."

"Master." Anakin's voice was urgent now.

Obi-Wan turned. "The droids? I doubt they sweep the tunnels."

"Not droids," Anakin said. "Water."

Obi-Wan whipped around just as a wall of water rushed down the tunnel. His feet were swept out from under him and he was propelled forward, smashing against the side of the tunnel and

STAR WARS: The False Peace

then somersaulting out of control against the power of the water. He fought his way to the surface, kicking and stroking. Once his head cleared, he saw Anakin nearby. They were careening down the tunnel with the force of the current.

“Aqua breathers!” Obi-Wan shouted.

He drew his out of his utility belt. Anakin did the same. At least they would not drown. But it would be impossible to fight their way back up the tunnel against the water. On the drawing, the tunnel seemed simply to end in bedrock. They would be smashed against it at this rate.

Then Obi-Wan heard a worse noise, one he hadn’t expected. Fighting the pull of the water, he thrashed around until he was facing behind him, the way they had come. At first he could only see the wall of churning water, waves of it coming toward him. Then he realized what was happening.

The tunnel was imploding behind them. In another few seconds, they would be crushed in the collapse.

Chapter Four

Anakin saw the danger at the same time as his Master. He did not waste time worrying. His gaze raked the tunnel sides, looking for a way to escape, even as the torrent of water turned him end over end in a tumbling motion that left him dizzy.

Most of the vents were too small, but Anakin remembered something. He had glanced only briefly at the schematic plan, but he remembered a larger vent that came a quarter-kilometer from the end of the tunnel. It had connected to another tunnel that had seemed to come to a dead end. But it would have to do. That would be their only chance to escape the water. That is, if the side tunnels had not been flooded as well.

But how far had they traveled? Which vent was the right one?

Obi-Wan must have had the same thought, but Anakin's Master had studied the blueprint longer. "Anakin!" Obi-Wan shouted over the sound of the rushing water. "Vent coming up on the left, five hundred meters! Grab on!"

"All right!" Anakin yelled, and got a mouthful of water. Choking, he stroked to keep himself above water. He would need every bit of his strength. Dust and debris from the collapsing tunnel now filled the air, making it difficult to breathe. The roar was deafening. Underneath the flow of the water, Anakin felt

STAR WARS: The False Peace

something else—a deep shuddering, as though the ground itself was moving.

He saw his Master stroke against the water. Anakin fought through the torrent, kicking his legs, and pushing against the water with his arms. He could not make headway.

The Force bounced over the water. It came from his Master. Anakin used it as Obi-Wan intended. He was part of the water now. He could feel the spaces within the drops and was able to let the water break over him and find a way to move against it. He pushed with all his might, but his effort didn't cost him his strength. It doubled it.

He made headway against the water, reaching the side of the tunnel, immediately behind Obi-Wan. Now the trick would be to get inside the vent. His Master held his cable launcher aloft, over the foaming water, and Anakin saw his objective. He unhooked his launcher as well, keeping himself afloat with one hand as he was knocked against the tunnel wall.

Now the vent was coming toward them—fast, faster than he'd planned for. He saw Obi-Wan's launcher snake out and catch on the vent. Obi-Wan grabbed the cable, fighting his way back against the water. Anakin aimed at the metal grid of the vent and missed.

He called on the Force to help him even as he was swept down past the vent. He pushed against the water, feeling it break against his skin. He felt the spaces between the particles and slipped through them.

Fingers dug into his coveralls and pulled. Obi-Wan reached under his arm and yanked him forward. Anakin was able to grab on to Obi-Wan's cable and hauled himself the rest of the way.

He joined Obi-Wan, hooking his fingers into the grating. The pressure of the water held the vent in place. They pulled with all their strength as the water cascaded over their heads, sometimes submerging them completely. The tunnel behind them was collapsing, chunks of plastoid and durasteel falling into the churning water and sometimes slamming against them on its way.

Jude Watson

The Force gathered and grew. The grating popped off, then bounced away on the rushing water.

Obi-Wan pushed Anakin inside the small space of the vent. Anakin slid forward as fast as he could pull himself, making room. His Master pulled himself up and in.

They panted for a moment, acknowledging the difficulty of the struggle. Then Obi-Wan quickly began to crawl forward.

"I see something ahead," he called. "A bit of gray light."

"Let's hope it's a way out."

Anakin followed his Master on his hands and knees. The small pipe they were crawling through was shaking now as the ground trembled around them.

Ahead he could now see that the blackness was faintly tinged with gray.

"There's a ladder."

He could hear the relief in his Master's voice. Anakin looked up. A metal ladder rose vertically and disappeared into the blackness above. Obi-Wan began to climb.

Anakin followed. A sudden blast of debris roared through the pipe below and rose toward them. He tasted dirt and metal in his mouth and choked.

He couldn't speak. He coughed out the debris in his mouth and kept climbing. He knew the pipe was collapsing below. At any moment they could be buried underground.

Obi-Wan suddenly stopped. He knocked on something over his head. "It's layers of durasteel," he said, struggling to reach for his lightsaber in the tiny space. "I'll have to cut through."

Anakin knew they had barely any time left. He watched as Obi-Wan buried his lightsaber in the metal plating above. The ladder was hot under his hands. It began to peel away from the side of the pipe. The system was collapsing.

Suddenly another stream of light joined Obi-Wan's from above. Anakin saw the durasteel peel away. Then Siri's face appeared. "You'd better hurry," she said.

STAR WARS: The False Peace

“That’s the general idea,” Obi-Wan answered, scrambling up the ladder.

Anakin followed as the ladder began to melt beneath him. He grabbed on to Siri’s strong grip and threw himself toward the opening. He was half pulled, half hauled up to the surface. He lay flat on the ground, breathing heavily.

“Come on,” Siri urged in his ear. “We have to get out of here. The entire factory is imploding.”

Anakin could feel the ground moving beneath him. He rose and began to run with the others. Ferus was in the lead, dashing over the ground even as it pitched and heaved. It was like running across a turbulent air current.

They reached the safety of the open plain and turned back to look. It was an amazing sight. The ground simply cracked apart in chunks and opened up. It swallowed the huge factory and caved in with a shower of fire and dust. Within only minutes, there was a smoking crater where the factory had been.

All the evidence had been sucked into the ground. Not even debris remained.

“We came to find you,” Siri said. “We saw the beginning of the collapse. We knew you would be inside the wing, so we raced around the perimeter, looking for a way in. The Force led me to the spot and then I sighted your lightsaber.”

“Omega knew we were here,” Anakin said, gazing at the crater. “He destroyed the factory to silence us and to cover his tracks.”

“Teda has left the planet,” Siri said.

“We fear Omega and Zan Arbor went with him,” Ferus added. “They didn’t file a flight plan. There’s no way of knowing where in the galaxy they are headed.”

Anakin saw his Master’s jaw tighten. He knew Obi-Wan was at the end of his control. He could feel the frustration coiled inside him. Once again, Granta Omega had escaped.

Obi-Wan’s comlink signaled. He glanced at it. “It’s Master Windu,” he said in a tight voice.

Jude Watson

They all waited a moment. Anakin watched his Master curiously. He knew Obi-Wan was fighting the temptation to throw the comlink into the vast area of the plains.

“Maybe you should answer it,” Siri suggested in a soft voice Anakin had never heard before. She was gazing at Obi-Wan with concern in her deep blue eyes.

Obi-Wan pressed the holomode on his comlink.

Mace Windu appeared in miniature holographic form. “Obi-Wan, Siri. The Jedi teams must return to Coruscant immediately.”

“But we are on the trail of Granta Omega,” Obi-Wan said. “We just—”

“Immediately,” Mace interrupted. “There is trouble.”

Chapter Five

Mace Windu was too busy to meet the two teams in the Council Room, or one of the smaller meeting rooms. They had to catch up to him as he strode down the Great Hall on his way to a Senate meeting.

He did not ask them how their pursuit of Granta Omega was going, or how their journey had been. Obi-Wan was relieved. The answers to both of those questions would have been negative. He felt fatigue shudder along his bones, and he knew both Ferus and Anakin, who were walking a few steps behind, needed rest. There did not seem to be much rest for any of the Jedi, these days.

“A feeling of distrust toward the Jedi Council has been growing among certain Senators,” Mace said as he walked purposefully, his robe swinging with the motion. “We have felt it for some time. We were not overly concerned. We knew Senators like Sano Sauro undermined us whenever they could. Lately, things have escalated. A faction is now active; it has influence. The Jedi Council senses that there is someone behind this faction, but we don’t know who it is.”

Obi-Wan looked at Siri incredulously. They had been called back to the Temple because of a Senate *power struggle*? There were few things that interested him less.

Jude Watson

“False stories have been spread,” Mace continued. “Events have been twisted so that the Jedi are seen as disloyal to the Republic, as interfering in galactic political matters by making them worse.”

“Master Windu,” Obi-Wan said carefully, “you have called us off an important mission to find a great enemy—”

“I know exactly what I did, Obi-Wan,” Mace said. “A powerful enemy outside and powerful enemies within. Can you decide who is more deadly?”

“But a Senate power struggle...is not unusual,” Obi-Wan protested, trying to keep his composure under the glare of Mace’s penetrating eyes.

Mace stopped so abruptly that his robe swung around like a whip. He looked at each of the Jedi, and seemed to pick up the fatigue and frustration there. He hesitated a moment.

“I recognize the importance of your mission,” he said gravely. “But your mission is one of hundreds, which all involve peacekeeping, saving lives, helping governments, fostering alliances. The Jedi are involved in missions throughout the galaxy, which will be compromised if this faction is not dealt with.”

“What do you mean? How could one faction in the Senate harm thousands of Jedi?” Siri asked.

“By organizing the withdrawal of official Senate support for the Jedi Council,” Mace said. He let his words settle over them.

“You understand what this would mean,” he continued, when he was sure he had their complete attention. “To operate without Senate approval would make us rogue diplomats and would completely undercut our authority. In short, without Senate support the effectiveness of the Jedi will be decimated.”

“But why did you call *us* back to fight this?” Anakin asked.

Ferus glanced at Anakin, amazed. Obi-Wan had to admit that the question did sound more like a complaint than a query.

Mace settled his severe gaze on Anakin. Obi-Wan thought that Anakin was most likely the only Jedi apprentice who could

STAR WARS: The False Peace

take it without flinching. Most Padawans seemed to visibly shrink as Master Windu's eyes plumbed their depths, seeming to find every petty motivation, every secret weakness they had.

Anakin merely waited. Strong, graceful, sure of himself.

"I chose this team because of your special skills," Mace told Anakin. "Obi-Wan may hate it, but he has a great knowledge of the Senate workings. I contacted Yoda on Kashyyyk, and he was in agreement."

Obi-Wan tried not to groan aloud. Siri allowed herself one small smile at his discomfort.

"His contacts are invaluable," Mace went on. "I chose Master Tachi for her lack of patience."

Siri's small grin disappeared. Mace raised an eyebrow at her.

"A fault she has tried to correct, but one that often gets in her way," he said. "I have a feeling it will be useful in this situation. Senators are used to deference. Without it, they feel lost. I wouldn't mind some of them feeling a bit unbalanced. And Ferus, of course, is a worthy addition. He studied Senate structure and knows more about it than any apprentice. And you, Anakin..."

Anakin waited.

"You have two things that can help us. One, of course, is your Force connection. You are just beginning to realize how it can work on beings as well as objects."

Anakin looked startled, as if he didn't understand that anyone else knew this. Obi-Wan suddenly realized it was true, and that he had known it without acknowledging it. How had Mace Windu discovered this? He had been with the group on Romin for only a short time.

Well. That was why Mace was on the Jedi Council. That was why, except for Yoda, Obi-Wan thought him the most powerful Jedi he'd ever known.

"Yes, together with observation and intuition the Force can help you see into the hearts and minds of others," Mace said

Jude Watson

softly, his eyes not leaving Anakin's face. "That is why the Force must be respected and handled with care."

"I know that, Master Windu," Anakin said.

"Perhaps you do. Or perhaps you will learn it more with every mission, the way the rest of us do. And there is one other thing," Mace said, resuming his walk. "Chancellor Palpatine has asked to see you and Obi-Wan specifically. He has requested a meeting."

Obi-Wan felt his heart sink. Most likely it would be the first of many meetings in the Senate, where it would be explained to him why the simplest way to do things was actually the most complicated.

"When is the meeting?" Obi-Wan asked, trying not to sigh as he matched his walk to Mace's long stride.

For the first time, Mace's features softened, and Obi-Wan was almost sure he caught the slightest of smiles. "Do not fret, Obi-Wan. You are on your way to it."

Chapter Six

Anakin and Obi-Wan stood in the reception room outside Supreme Chancellor Palpatine's private offices in the Senate. They stayed by the window, looking out at the busy space lanes, while Siri and Ferus took up positions near the door and Mace, with the utmost calmness, took a chair.

"I know how disappointed you are, Master," Anakin said.

"Master Windu is right," Obi-Wan replied. "We are needed here. And besides..."

The pause continued. Anakin waited for his Master to finish the sentence, but Obi-Wan continued to stare out at the airspeeders jockeying for position. Some were coming to dock at the vast landing platform that served the Senate. Anakin watched them for a moment as well. If the Senators or their underlings could not obey traffic rules on when to yield and when to go, how could they solve the problems of the galaxy?

"On Romin, do you remember how Teda said they would be going to Coruscant?" Obi-Wan said at last. "We couldn't decide if that was a diversion or not."

"We didn't think Teda was clever enough to create a diversion," Anakin said with a grin.

"Exactly. What is happening here...it has the marks of Omega on it."

Jude Watson

Anakin was startled. “Do you think Omega is involved in the movement to discredit the Jedi?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not directly, but it’s best to keep it in mind. It certainly fits his interests, doesn’t it? Maybe returning here was not an end to our journey, but a continuation.”

Sly Moore slipped out from the interior room with silent grace. She nodded at the waiting Jedi to indicate that Chancellor Palpatine was ready to receive them, then lifted one slender arm draped in silvery fabric to indicate the door they should take.

Siri, Ferus, Obi-Wan, Anakin, and Mace entered the inner office.

Palpatine stood by a grouping of chairs. Anakin thought he looked imposing in his simple robes of muted colors. His face looked pale and drawn, almost bloodless. Anakin imagined that the Chancellor’s job robbed him of rest and outdoor activity. He was sacrificing his life in order to save the Senate from being overrun by those who would use it for their own ends.

“I am indebted to you for coming so promptly,” Palpatine greeted them in the deep voice whose softness served to convey his power. “Please sit. There is no time to lose.”

He waited until the Jedi were all seated before sitting himself. Palpatine shook his head, as if in deep thought. “I feel such sorrow for having to bring you here,” he said. “I am ashamed of the Senate. There is a growing tide of anti-Jedi feeling and the best of us cannot seem to stop it. It is full of lies and half-truths, all twisted to fit an agenda.” Palpatine opened his palms in a gesture of helplessness. “I am at a loss to explain it, except to say that in a galaxy so mired in conflict some might turn to a scapegoat to further their own plans.”

“Or deflect attention from those plans,” Mace said.

“That is true, Master Windu,” Palpatine said. “And wise. But what these plans are, I do not know.”

“Is Sano Sauro behind this?” Obi-Wan asked. Senator Sauro was an enemy of the Jedi, and Omega had been his protégé as a boy.

STAR WARS: The False Peace

Palpatine shook his head. "Not this time. The leader of the anti-Jedi faction is a formerly obscure Senator from Nuralee. His name is Bog Divinian."

Obi-Wan started. Bog Divinian! He was married to Obi-Wan's good friend Astri Oddo, the daughter of Didi Oddo. Obi-Wan had met Bog on a mission during the Galactic Games. Bog was not yet a Senator at that time, but he had lied in his testimony to an official investigation in order to protect the Commerce Guild. Obi-Wan had no doubt then that Bog had the makings of a politician. He was not surprised to hear he had succeeded in his career. No doubt the gratitude of the powerful Commerce Guild had helped.

Obi-Wan glanced at Mace. Now he knew there was another reason he had been called to help.

"I know Bog Divinian," he said. "His wife is an old friend."

Palpatine looked relieved. "That is good news. I urge you to speak directly to him. Perhaps a personal appeal can help."

Obi-Wan doubted this was the case, but he inclined his head in agreement.

"I must inform you of a recent development," Palpatine said. "Roy Teda has arrived on Coruscant. I know that the Jedi were recently involved in the coup on his planet of Romin."

Obi-Wan felt this news pass like electricity between him and the other Jedi. Perhaps his idea about Omega being involved here wasn't so far-fetched.

"Teda has lost no time in joining the anti-Jedi faction, I'm afraid," Palpatine continued. "He's already given testimony that the Jedi were responsible for aiding the unlawful coup on his planet."

"Unfortunately this is technically true, though a misreading of events," Mace said, arching an eyebrow at Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan knew that Mace was still annoyed at him and Siri for aiding a coup without first consulting the Jedi Council.

But Teda's arrival on the planet could be good news, Obi-Wan thought. It would give them a chance to observe him closely.

Jude Watson

Perhaps they could learn more about Omega. Teda was not a bright creature, and no doubt it would be possible to discover how he fit into Omega's larger plans.

"He has also claimed that the Jedi were responsible for a factory implosion on Falleen. He's managed to get the Falleen Senator quite upset about it." Chancellor Palpatine steeped his fingers and looked over them at the Jedi. "I'm afraid there is nothing I can do about this. There is just enough evidence in the charges to make them credible. Teda has the right to petition for asylum on Coruscant. It is up to the Jedi Council to refute the charges."

"Are the charges formal?" Mace asked, somewhat surprised.

"Yes. That is the reason for this meeting. There will be a hearing this afternoon. I suggest that a Jedi presence is needed."

Mace stood. "Master Kenobi will attend the hearing."

"He must," Palpatine said. "He has been called as a witness."

Once again, Obi-Wan inclined his head, but he seethed inwardly at the distraction. *Just my luck*, he thought. *A meeting and a Senate hearing, all in the same day.*

Omega could be in his grasp, but if he wasn't careful, he would spend all his time in meetings and hearings and never accomplish a thing.

Just like a Senator, Obi-Wan thought with an inward groan.

Chapter Seven

The hearing was held in a smaller meeting room at the Senate. It wasn't as big as the main chamber, but it held twenty tiers with seating for onlookers and pods for several hundred Senators. The room was packed with an overflow crowd. Senators, aides, HoloNet news correspondents, and curious Coruscant natives crowded the seats and the aisles in the tiers, and every pod was full.

Obi-Wan sat in a pod with Mace Windu, docked in a mid-level tier. "I'm surprised there is such a crowd for this hearing," he murmured to Mace. "Usually meetings like this are so dull that no one attends."

"Note who is here," Mace said in a low tone. "The room is packed with Bog Divinian's supporters. I hear that one must obtain tickets to observe, and supporters of the Jedi were told there were no seats."

Obi-Wan watched as Bog Divinian leaned forward to call Roy Teda to the stand. Teda's pod floated forward.

"I greet you hello, fellow rulers, amazing Senators, all wonderful beings who love democracy and truth," Roy Teda said. "I, too, am a believer and a lover of the democratic principles of many voices, all saying the same thing."

Roy Teda began his testimony, and began to lie.

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan listened to the lies fall from his mouth. He was not surprised.

"I beseech you, Senators, rulers, fellow citizens of the galaxy," Teda concluded, spreading his arms. "Stop this outrageous outrage before it overtakes us completely! The Jedi came to my planet and secretly plotted in an underhanded way with an unlawful army to bring about the destruction of the elected government!"

Obi-Wan snorted. "Hardly an army," he said quietly to Mace. "And we didn't plot with them."

"The truth has no place here," Mace replied. "They don't want to hear it. But you must tell your truth anyway."

"They overthrew my government! They rampaged through the streets! And it is no accident," Teda said, leaning forward on his fists, "that the Romin treasury of wealth disappeared!"

"Yes, because you looted it," Obi-Wan muttered.

"Jedi interference must be outlawed on every planet in the galaxy!" Teda thundered. "Let them go back to their Temple and practice their secret hidden arts on one another!" he shouted. "Leave governing the galaxy to the Senate!"

Blocs of Senators roared approval. The crowd hooted and stamped.

High above Teda, Bog Divinian hovered. He did not dock his pod the way the presiding Senator usually did. He remained in midair, so that he would be in full view of the crowd.

"Senator Divinian, I have signaled for questioning and have been ignored!" Bail Organa's voice was a shout. He stood, maneuvering his pod closer to Bog's.

"If you have a question, of course the presiding official—which is me, may I remind you—will recognize it," Bog said, clearly displeased at the interruption. "The Honorable Senator from Alderaan has the floor."

Organa's pod zoomed closer. "Do you have any evidence of your claims, Former Ruler Teda?" he asked. His handsome face

STAR WARS: The False Peace

was stern, and his robes were thrown back off his shoulders as he faced the former dictator.

“Yes, of course,” Teda answered smoothly. “The evidence is on Romin, only I am in exile and cannot reach it.”

“The committee has ruled that a subcommittee will be formed in order to investigate the charges,” Bog announced.

“And who will be appointed to this subcommittee?” Organa asked, turning to Bog.

“Some members of my committee—”

“All enemies of the Jedi!” Organa thundered.

“—who will choose its members, according to rule 729900, subsection B38 of the subcommittee rules—”

“—which are currently being revised by a committee headed by Senator Sano Sauro, another enemy of the Jedi!” Organa pointed out. There were few Senators who studied the bureaucracy as extensively. Organa knew that the tedious work of keeping up with the bureaucracy netted results. Injustice often began when the powerful Senators who headed committees changed obscure rules that they knew no one would notice.

No one but Bail Organa.

“The Honorable Senator from Alderaan must agree that no matter how unhappy he may be, it cannot be argued that procedure isn’t being followed,” Bog said smugly.

“The procedure was changed by the same Senator who has been asked to investigate unfounded charges that suit his own agenda,” Organa pointed out. “It is the very definition of unfair. It is also an outrage.”

Obi-Wan was impressed. Organa spoke with authority. He did not bluster or shout. He made his points with acid, not with blows. He spoke truth, but Mace was right—this crowd did not want to hear it.

“The presiding official refuses to get bogged down in procedural details,” Bog said, waving his hand. “The Honorable Senator from Alderaan will now yield the floor. Your objections

Jude Watson

will be noted in the log. The presiding official calls Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi for testimony.”

Obi-Wan stood at the front of his pod. He pressed the lever that controlled its movement. The box moved forward to the center of the room.

Bog did not acknowledge that he knew Obi-Wan or had met him before, not even with a slight nod.

“Tell us, Jedi Kenobi, did the Jedi secretly meet with the resistance army on Romin?”

“Members of the resistance movement captured two of our apprentices,” Obi-Wan replied. “The Jedi were on Romin to pursue a galactic criminal—”

“Ah, let’s talk about that. Isn’t it true you were on Romin illegally and using false ID docs?”

“It is true that we used false ID docs. Sometimes the Jedi need to travel in secrecy,” Obi-Wan answered. “We were on the trail of an extremely dangerous criminal who had the means to destroy—”

“I am not asking your intent, merely clarifying your means,” Bog interrupted. “Which, as I pointed out, were against the laws of Romin. Did you have personal dealings with the criminal Joylin who has seized power on Romin?”

“An action that the Senate sanctioned due to the criminal activities of Roy Teda,” Obi-Wan pointed out.

“There are some in the Senate who pushed through this initiative, it’s true,” Bog said, implying that this action was highly suspect. “That initiative is currently under investigation.”

“Senator Divinian!” Bail Organa called.

“Senator Organa, you are out of order!” Bog thundered. “I am questioning this witness!” He turned back to Obi-Wan. “Answer the question. Isn’t it true that the Jedi assisted the takeover?”

Obi-Wan hesitated a fraction of a second. It was true that the Jedi did assist Joylin and his band. But the plans had already been in place.

STAR WARS: The False Peace

"Answer, please." Obi-Wan saw a flash of mean triumph in Bog's eyes.

"Yes. We offered them assistance."

"So you overthrew a legally elected government for your own purposes."

"No. We—"

"The record will note that the question has been answered," Bog snapped.

Bog looked down at his datapad, but Obi-Wan was sure it was for show. Bog knew exactly what his next question was going to be. He wanted Obi-Wan's admission to hang in the air. The chamber was silent now, every face turned toward Obi-Wan. He was in an impossible position, and he knew it. He could not save the Jedi here. He could not save the Jedi with words, with truth.

Obi-Wan rarely felt helpless. He hated the feeling. He felt it burn inside.

"Isn't it also true that the Jedi were involved in a factory implosion on Falleen?"

"We happened to be in the vicinity."

"Oh," sneered Bog, "Jedi Knights are factory workers now?"

"Two of us were," Obi-Wan answered honestly.

"Do you mean to tell me that you got jobs in a factory? That's hard to believe."

"Truth is sometimes hard to believe," Obi-Wan said evenly. "That's why ignorant minds have a difficult time with it."

Bog's face reddened. Obi-Wan realized he had done an ignorant thing himself. He had allowed his temper to get the better of his judgment. Always a bad idea—and, for a Jedi, a severe lapse.

"So you sabotaged the factory—"

"No." It was Obi-Wan's turn to interrupt. "We were caught there. The factory was deliberately destroyed by its owner to cover up violations."

"And you were there, after hours, after everyone else had gone home."

Jude Watson

“Yes.”

“I see. So you were the only ones there during the implosion, but you did not trigger it.”

“I don’t know if we were the only ones there. How do you?”

Bog flushed again. “What I see before me is arrogance and a complete lack of remorse at the destruction of property—”

“Oh, I feel remorse,” Obi-Wan said.

“That is unusual,” Bog snapped.

“I never received my paycheck.”

Guffaws exploded throughout the chamber. Bog looked helpless and angry. Obi-Wan followed his gaze to a dark corner of the chamber, where a pod hugged the wall. Obi-Wan recognized the slim, dark form of Sano Sauro.

Sauro must have sent Bog a private message on his datapad, for Bog looked down. He nodded vigorously, while the laughter slowly died down.

Obi-Wan had succeeded in something, at least. He knew now that Sano Sauro was controlling Bog like a puppet.

“The witness is dismissed,” Bog said. “The hearing is adjourned.”

Obi-Wan maneuvered the pod back to the wall. He crossed to sit next to Mace. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, Obi-Wan. You did the best you could.”

Mace looked out over the chamber crowded with beings. “Something is here,” he murmured. “Some darkness. We feel it growing, but every time we look, we see nothing at all. You spend your time on missions, Obi-Wan. You are not here, like the Jedi Council is. Lately, I have been wondering...”

“Yes, Master Windu?” Obi-Wan asked respectfully. It wasn’t often that Mace revealed what he was thinking.

“We send the Jedi throughout the galaxy. To help. To keep peace. To bring aid to suffering populations. But in the end, I wonder...” Mace’s stubborn gaze raked the chamber “...if our real job lies here.”

STAR WARS: The False Peace

"I hope not," Obi-Wan said, gazing over the room. "Out of all my missions, this is one place where I do not want to stand and fight. It's like shouting into the wind."

"None of us want to be here, Obi-Wan," Mace said. "Perhaps that is our undoing."

He took a step back, then turned and disappeared into the interior hallways. Obi-Wan looked out over the crowded chamber. How, he wondered, had it come to this? Why were so many willing to believe the worst of the Jedi Order?

He glanced over at the shadowy box where Sano Sauro sat, receiving guests. Obi-Wan had first tangled with Sauro as a mere boy, when Sauro had questioned him in a hearing to investigate the accidental death of a student at the Jedi Temple. Sauro had twisted Obi-Wan's words even then, and Obi-Wan suspected that the Senator had crafted Bog's questions today.

Disgusted, Obi-Wan turned and headed out of the box toward the interior reception room, where most of the crowd was now congregating. He saw Bog Divinian hurrying toward him, a wide smile on his face.

"Obi-Wan! So good to see you again!" Bog thumped him on the shoulder. Obi-Wan gazed at him incredulously.

"Oh, you didn't mind my questions, did you? Politics. A rough game, eh? I hope there are no hard feelings. After all, politics is temporary. Friendship is forever."

Obi-Wan just stared at him. Friendship? With Bog? They had never been friends. Bog's words were completely hollow, as empty as the man before him.

"Oh, excuse me, I forgot." Bog whipped out a small data recorder. "Hearing ended, great success, now greeting supporters."

Bog indicated the recorder to Obi-Wan. "This is how I keep track of things. And one day it will come in handy when my biography is written. You'd be shocked and dismayed if you knew how many important leaders neglected to keep notes and records for the biographer to follow."

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan said nothing. Whereas once he bowed and scraped to please those in power in order to advance his career, now Bog saw himself as a great leader. He had fulfilled his early promise and become a pompous, scheming bore.

Bog rode over Obi-Wan's silence. "Have you seen my wife? She's here. She is dying to see you." Bog searched above the crowd, then began to wave. "Astri! Astri! I found our friend!"

Obi-Wan saw Astri then. She was dressed in a simple blue robe, but her carriage was regal, and she looked as impressive as the Senators and their entourages who were dressed in opulent cloaks. She had cut her springy curls short, clipped to fall softly around her head. She came toward him slowly through the crowd, not rushing, as Astri always used to do. Her gaze seemed to slide off him in the way that he had come to know from other officials—diplomats, Senators, rulers—those who met beings constantly and never invested in a true exchange of hearts and minds with any of them. His heart fell in disappointment. Astri, he feared, had become a Senator's wife.

"Hello, Obi-Wan." Her voice was pitched lower, yet another thing that had changed. "I'm glad to see you looking so well."

"I'm glad to see you, too," Obi-Wan said, even though he realized that Astri hadn't really said she was glad to see him. "And how is Didi?"

"He is back home." At last a small smile appeared on Astri's face, and he saw a flash of the prettiness he'd known. "Entertaining his grandson. Or should I say, they are entertaining each other."

Obi-Wan smiled. "You have a son?"

"A beautiful boy. His name is Lune. He just turned three."

"My son is the light of our lives," Bog said. "Astri, my dear, I fear that Obi-Wan is a little put out with me."

Astri's gaze lost its warmth and formality clicked back into place. She looked away, past Obi-Wan's shoulder, into the crowd.

"You must tell him that each of us must follow our convictions," Bog continued.

“Obi-Wan knows this, no doubt.”

“You must tell him how I’ve struggled with my decision to throw my support behind this. But I’ve come to feel that the Jedi Council wields too much influence in the Senate and with the Chancellor. I don’t want to make enemies, I’m just looking for a more balanced approach. Is that so strange?”

Obi-Wan didn’t answer. It was clear Bog did not expect one, and would not listen if one were given. The words he spoke seemed to have been memorized, crafted by someone far smarter than Bog.

How had Astri fallen for him? Obi-Wan had known Astri since he was a boy. He had watched her brave blaster fire and bounty hunters even while being terrified. All in order to save her father and Qui-Gon. She had turned herself from a cook in a rundown café into a warrior.

Now she was a Senator’s wife. He felt sadness deep within him. Did he even know her anymore? Had everything, for Astri, only been about playing a role?

“It was nice to see you again, Obi-Wan,” Astri said. “Take care.”

She drifted off into the crowd. Bog gazed after her with affection.

“A perfect Senator’s wife. She’s involved in relief efforts, which is so important for my profile.”

Obi-Wan felt he’d had enough. He saw Roy Teda leave a group of supporters and make his way toward the door. Saying a crisp farewell to Bog, Obi-Wan followed him. He had wasted enough time.

Chapter Eight

Anakin sat with Supreme Chancellor Palpatine in his red-walled office. Red Guards stood outside at attention. He had wanted to see how his Master did at the hearing, but Palpatine had detained him, and he couldn't refuse the Chancellor. How could you refuse someone whose term as Chancellor had expired years ago, but who stayed on to serve because so many saw him as integral to the well-being of the galaxy?

Anakin would have preferred to be searching the galaxy for Granta Omega, but he couldn't do that, either. There were times Anakin felt that wherever he turned, there was yet another order he could not refuse. He was trapped in everybody else's needs but his own.

Palpatine seemed to sense his mood. "You think you are wasting your time here," he observed.

Anakin searched for a way to be honest without being rude. "We were on an important mission."

"I can understand being frustrated by the Senate," Palpatine replied. "Yet here is where the power lies."

"It is not power I'm interested in," Anakin said.

"Really." The former Senator from Naboo smiled. "That is a very Jedi-like response. Yet, can I say this—it is not entirely true. The Jedi do not seek power, yet they have it. Why is that?"

STAR WARS: The False Peace

The words sounded oddly familiar to him, as if he'd heard them before, but Anakin could not figure out where. He had a feeling that Palpatine was posing the question just to hear what Anakin had to say.

"Because we have the Force," Anakin said. "It is a source of power, yet we do not seek it. It is simply there."

"And it is a Jedi's choice to use it," Palpatine said.

Anakin smiled. "You sound almost like one of our critics."

"Hardly. I am the Jedi Council's biggest supporter. What I am trying to do is discover a way to fight those who seek to take away their power, their influence. I have come to several conclusions, though, and they aren't helpful. Would you care to hear them?"

"Of course." Anakin leaned forward slightly to show his interest. He felt flattered that Palpatine took him seriously enough to talk to him this way. He had imagined that the Chancellor did not waste his time with mere Padawan learners. He dealt directly with the Jedi Council, with powerful Jedi like Mace Windu and Yoda.

Palpatine looked out his window toward the spires of the Jedi Temple. His gaze was clouded. "One reason that the Jedi Order has become the object of jealousy in the Senate is that the Jedi don't know how to defend themselves. Of course the Jedi are bold warriors, but when it comes to the war of words in the Senate, they simply disengage. This is a grave mistake."

"Our actions and our results speak for themselves."

"There you are wrong. Results do not speak for themselves, not in the Senate. There must always be someone to *explain* why the results are good." Palpatine shrugged. "Everything must be interpreted, or someone else will do the interpreting. Facts are not important, only the twist that helps the Senators understand them. It is the way it is. They must be fed their diet of truth."

"You make Senators sound like children," Anakin observed.

"Ah, but they are." Palpatine shook his head. "I did not seek this office, yet I must carry out the burden of carrying on its

Jude Watson

duties. One of these duties is to recognize that what the Senate needs is a strong hand, just as children do.”

“The Jedi don’t believe that,” Anakin argued. “In the Jedi Order, children are given the freedom to dissent and be independent.”

Palpatine smiled. “Unlike the Jedi, Senators are not gifted with the Force. Jedi can afford to give their younglings freedom, because they know they are exceptional. Most beings are not exceptional, Anakin. They need someone to tell them what to do, and sometimes, what to believe.”

Anakin struggled to grasp this. It went against what he believed. Yet he could not deny that Palpatine’s strong hand had kept the Senate together during these years of growing strife with the Separatist movement.

“You want to turn the Jedi into politicians,” he finally said.

“No. I want them to recognize that they are politicians, whether they like it or not. Power and politics are inseparable.” Chancellor Palpatine rose. “You, Anakin Skywalker, you have power. I can see it in you. Your connection to the Force gives you clarity and boldness. The Jedi Order needs more like you.”

“I am still a student,” Anakin said, standing.

“Then learn,” Palpatine told him. “Take this opportunity. Find out how to maneuver in Senate politics. It might turn out to be the skill the Jedi Council needs most. Not exactly the glory of lightsaber battles, but crucial nonetheless.”

“How can I do that?” Anakin asked.

“Come with me to meetings while you’re here,” Palpatine said. “Watch. Listen. Tell me what you think, and I will share my thoughts with you.”

It was an extraordinary offer. Anakin knew he had to take it.

“I will have to request permission from my Master.”

Palpatine inclined his head. “Of course. And in the end, who knows? Perhaps you’ll be able to teach Master Kenobi a thing or two.”

Chapter Nine

Obi-Wan trailed Teda through the maze of Senate corridors that led through the various wings. He hated how Teda strolled as though he belonged there. He remembered the prison he had seen on Romin, the prisoners ragged and starving. He remembered the slums he had seen on the outskirts of the capital city, the luxury of Teda's life compared to the suffering he pushed outside the city walls. Teda did not deserve his clear conscience. He did not deserve his ease.

Teda stopped at last at one of the little cafés that were tucked into the alcoves of the Senate hallways, a place for beings to stop and take light refreshment before returning to their duties. Teda hesitated at the entrance and looked around, then headed to a table in a far corner. Obi-Wan headed for the self-service refreshment bar. As he helped himself to some tea, he saw in the mirror overhead that Teda was meeting Senator Sauro.

Obi-Wan made no attempt to conceal himself. He put down his steaming mug and headed to their table.

"I can't say this is a surprise," he said. "I expected that you would be behind any plot to discredit the Jedi Order, Sauro."

"As usual, you begin every exchange with rudeness," Sano Sauro said coolly. His thin face looked as tidy and pale as ever. His lips were almost white. He was dressed in a severe suit of

Jude Watson

black cloth. "I don't know what I've done to deserve your contempt and I don't care, but it continues to be tedious to put up with it."

"You know very well what you've done in the past, and what you are doing right now," Obi-Wan said. "You are the shadow behind these hearings."

Sauro sipped at a glass of water, the only item in front of him. "Senator Divinian is the presiding official over the hearings, not me."

"How odd, then, that you are meeting with the main witness against the Jedi," Obi-Wan said.

"I'm merely holding out a friendly hand to an exiled ruler of a democratic government that was overthrown by Jedi aggression," Sauro answered.

"That's right," Roy Teda said, anxious to demonstrate his importance in the discussion.

"Also, how odd that you chose to meet so far away from the hearing chamber, in a deserted part of the Senate," Obi-Wan remarked.

"I like peace and quiet," Sauro said. "Obviously, I am not finding it at the moment."

"That's exactly right," Teda repeated, nodding. He looked desperately eager to please Sano Sauro.

Sauro didn't pay attention to Teda. He kept his cool gaze on Obi-Wan. "So you see, Kenobi, I have no hand in the utter demoralization of the Jedi. I am merely a witness to it."

Obi-Wan leaned over the table on his fists. He locked eyes with Sauro. "I'll leave you to your thieves and murderers, Sauro. I realize they've gotten you far, but one day the company you keep will ensure your downfall."

"Who are you calling a murderer?" Teda sputtered. "Or wait, am I the thief?"

Obi-Wan turned on his heel and left. He walked quickly through the halls and jumped into a turbolift. He didn't want to waste any more time. He needed to talk to the one being he

STAR WARS: The False Peace

knew had the most knowledge of Senate intrigue, the best political mind he knew—his friend Tyro Caladian.

He took the lift down to the lowest level, then followed a twisting corridor that narrowed as it descended. After a short ramp, it turned and Obi-Wan found himself in a dim hallway. Bins and durasteel boxes were stacked outside a door. He smiled. Tyro hadn't changed a bit. He could always count on his industry.

The door was slightly ajar, so he pushed it open and peered in. "Tyro, I need you once again."

A voice came from behind a stack of procedural manuals. "My ears are happy! It is the voice of my friend Obi-Wan!"

A Svivreni poked his head over the manuals. His small face twitched and his bright eyes were alight with pleasure. He scurried out from behind the desk that took up almost the entire room. He stopped directly in front of Obi-Wan, opened his hand, and closed it. He placed it against his heart, and then Obi-Wan's.

Obi-Wan followed the same gestures. Svivreni had different codes of greeting and good-bye, and Obi-Wan had advanced to the most affectionate with Tyro. "It's been too long."

"Yes, indeed. Oh, let me find you a chair." Tyro broke away and began to sweep books off a chair. "You Jedi, never sitting, always moving."

Obi-Wan sat. Tyro leaned against the desk to face him. Now, they were eye to eye.

"I do not have to ask why you have come," Tyro said, his dark eyes full of worry. "I was at the hearing."

Obi-Wan grimaced. "I did badly."

"You did well, my friend. As did Senator Organa. But the anti-Jedi faction had packed the house with supporters. And Divinian's questioning!" Tyro threw up his hands. "An outrage. It was obvious he wasn't looking for truth. In another time, *too* obvious. Steps would be taken to have him removed from a position of authority. But these days..." Tyro shrugged and

Jude Watson

fiddled with the metal clasp that kept back his waist-length dark hair. It was a gesture he used when nervous, and Tyro was often anxious about the state of the Senate.

“Yes, things continue to decline, no matter how the Chancellor tries,” Obi-Wan remarked.

“He does his best. But this uproar against the Jedi—I’ve never seen anything like it. Even for the Senate, it’s ridiculous. And frustrating. It’s just a distraction from the real work they should be doing.”

Distraction. The word clanged like a bell inside his mind, but Obi-Wan didn’t know why. Another word had hit him earlier, just a tiny *ping*, what was it...

Demoralized. Sauro had said that the Jedi were demoralized.

Disruption + Demoralization + Distraction = Devastation.

Xanatos! Granta Omega’s father had devised that formula for orchestrating evil to take root. He had done it at the Jedi Temple itself, hoping to destroy it forever. Could it be that his son was using the same formula to destroy the Senate? Was that his real goal?

If Omega was behind this Senatorial effort, he had already succeeded in disrupting the Senate, demoralizing the Jedi, and distracting everyone. But if that was truly the case, what was the coming devastation he was planning?

Obi-Wan didn’t know. But suddenly he knew in his bones that his earlier instinct was dead-on. Omega was behind this.

“...and I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this,” Tyro was saying, “but it was inevitable given the circumstances, I suppose.”

Obi-Wan wrenched his attention back to his friend. “What is it?”

“Bog Divinian’s committee has taken an unusual step. Instead of a recommendation, it has just entered an official petition to ban the Jedi Order from any Senate action. This was clever...but not clever enough. Senator Organa found a clause that allowed him to appeal directly to the Chancellor in a separate closed-door

STAR WARS: The False Peace

session. Palpatine is scheduled to decide on the matter later this afternoon in a meeting with both Senators.”

“This has all just happened since the hearing? I thought the Senate was supposed to be *slow*.”

“Only when real things are getting done,” Tyro said drily. “When it comes to political maneuvering, you have to move fast.” Tyro gave him a keen look. “What is it, my friend? The Jedi Order is in trouble, but we will find a way to fight, I promise you. You have more friends than enemies. You just have to remind your friends that they are your friends. It’s the Senate way.”

“The Senate way,” Obi-Wan pronounced in disgust. “And what is that? Talk. Deals. Bribes. Corruption.”

“Obi-Wan.” Tyro silenced him gently. “I agree with you. All this is true. But I still believe in the Senate. It is the living symbol of the Republic. Until it was formed, the galaxy boiled with chaos. It is our only chance to bring peace to the thousands of worlds that cannot manage alone. There are good beings in the Senate, like Senator Organa. Many of them. They will win in the end.”

Obi-Wan had never heard Tyro defend the Senate so passionately before. Usually, he railed against it. But of course that was why he continued to toil down in his little office, searching for ways to make it better. “What amazes me is that you keep your faith in the Senate, no matter how many times your heart is broken.”

“Oh, my heart may break from time to time, but never my will,” Tyro said lightly. “In that way we are alike. Now, tell me what worries you.”

“It’s not so much the petition, but what the petition might conceal,” Obi-Wan explained.

Tyro shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“What if this action to discredit the Jedi is just a diversion so that something worse could occur?” Obi-Wan said.

Jude Watson

What he liked about Tyro was that his friend did not waste time. His small, furred face grew intent. “Ah. Of course. Continue.”

“I have been tracking Granta Omega and Jenna Zan Arbor, both of whom are familiar to you,” Obi-Wan said to Tyro’s nod. “What if they were behind this latest scheme? What if it is merely a smokescreen for their real plan?”

The possibilities clicked through Tyro’s brain. “Of course if it is true that they’re involved, this would be more than possible—it would be likely,” he said rapidly. “It fits with the way Omega operates. And it makes sense, since Sano Sauro is involved.” Tyro’s face contracted into an expression of distaste. Sauro was his enemy, too. “That would explain why he has remained in the background. He doesn’t want us to connect him to this campaign, because he knows we will immediately make the connection to Omega.”

“There is something we’re not seeing here,” Obi-Wan said.

“The Chancellor is, of course, a big supporter of the Jedi,” Tyro said, thinking. “It’s unlikely that he will approve the petition. Bog and Sauro could then manipulate this defeat into a call for a no-confidence vote. That would allow them to propose Sauro as Chancellor. I know that is his ultimate ambition.”

“Then Omega would control the Senate,” Obi-Wan said slowly.

Tyro tapped his tapered fingers on the manuals. “But Palpatine is too powerful and too skilled to be outmaneuvered. And I doubt even Sauro could muster enough support for a vote of no confidence. Let’s see, he controls the Viga alliance, and the planets in the Commerce Guild, and...yes, he could get several systems in the Mid-Rim. But in the Core? No. He’s powerful, but he’s actively disliked, and there is a strong opposition faction headed by Bail Organa that can’t be discounted.”

Tyro ended his speculation, realizing that Obi-Wan had grown impatient with the details of Senate politics.

STAR WARS: The False Peace

“In conclusion,” he said, sighing, “I have no conclusion. I can’t see them trying such a thing. You don’t try something like that unless you’re sure you can succeed. Palpatine is tremendously popular, especially at the moment. Tomorrow there will be a ceremony for the opening of the All Planets Relief Fund. A huge group of supporters will be attending—including many Jedi. This is Palpatine’s pet project, and it’s a good one. He’s worked his way through the tangled bureaucracy to get it off the ground. Now any world in peril can petition the Senate directly for funds through one central account. Palpatine claims this will stop the bureaucratic slowdown for relief to troubled worlds. You see, before this, a world would have to petition the committee for Relief, which would then turn the matter over to a specially appointed investigatory committee, which would then—”

Obi-Wan’s comlink signaled, and he held up a hand to interrupt Tyro. He had to admit he was relieved not to get a crash course in the now outdated procedural details of Senate relief efforts.

Siri’s crisp voice came through the comlink. “We found something. Possibly Omega and Zan Arbor’s hideout. We need backup. They could be inside.”

She gave him the coordinates. Obi-Wan stood as he flipped his comlink closed and put it back in his belt—at last, action and not meetings. “I have to go.”

“And you will take care, I hope. I think you are right. Our enemies are hidden, and that makes them more dangerous.” Tyro held his hand out, fingers spread. Obi-Wan pressed his own spread-fingered palm against it. It was the gesture of good-bye that the Svivreni made to only those closest to them.

The Svivreni did not say good-bye. They considered it bad luck.

“So go,” Tyro said in the Svivreni farewell.

Chapter Ten

Obi-Wan was well acquainted with the many exit doors of the Senate complex, and he hit the streets of Coruscant in minutes. He took a vertical monorail down a hundred stories to the business district where Siri and Ferus were located, near the bank of Aargau. On the way, he contacted Anakin.

As he rounded the last corner he saw his apprentice streaking down through the air. Looking up, Obi-Wan could see that Anakin had made the jump from a platform twenty stories up.

"I'm sure there was a lift tube," Obi-Wan said as Anakin ran up. "Or even stairs."

Anakin grinned. "Too slow."

Together, they ran up to Siri and Ferus, who had taken up a position behind a jumble of airspeeders parked in front of an interior mall of popular shops and restaurants.

"We got a tip from an informer," Siri said. She pointed to a small white building across the way. A blinking sign said VIRTUAL HAPPINESS. Another sign, smaller and clumsily handwritten said: OUT OF BUSINESS.

"It was one of those sim-voyage places," Siri said. "You know, where you can go and have a simulated vacation experience to the luxury worlds of the Core. But our source says a couple moved in a few days ago. They said they were starting a

STAR WARS: The False Peace

business, but nothing has been done, and they only exit the building at night.”

“It could be anyone,” Obi-Wan said.

“Ferus did a quick check of the airspeeders parked here,” Siri said, with a look that told Obi-Wan he should wait for her to finish. “Nothing unusual came up. Then he did a check with Coruscant security and went through the tickets for illegally parked airspeeders, cross-checking with known IDs used by the Slams. A standard Ralion B-14 that was recently bought at a speeder lot twenty levels down matched one of the false ID docs the Slams had on their master ship.”

“Good work,” Obi-Wan said to Ferus. “I say we go in. We don’t have time to waste.”

They strode to the door. As soon as they did, a buzzer sounded, and a light flashed. An automated female voice said in a pleasant tone, “Welcome. We’re not home. If you wish to leave a text message, use the keypad.”

“I have a message, all right,” Obi-Wan said, drawing his lightsaber. “We’re coming in.”

He plunged his lightsaber through the door. It disintegrated from the center out.

The house was dark inside. Obi-Wan stepped in.

Immediately, lights blazed. Sound blared. He heard the sound of rockets, and he fell to the ground and rolled, lightsaber ready to deflect. Behind him, the Jedi moved in to flank him.

The walls flickered and pulsed with sound and light. It took a few seconds for Obi-Wan to make sense of it, then he realized every wall held a moving image, a holoprojection of a separate scene. One was a field with exploding novas in the sky—the famous shooting stars of Nantama. Another was of the mountains of Belazura. Another showed fireworks exploding over the translucent seas of Dremulae. All were popular vacationing spots.

The noise was at full volume—surf, fireworks, wind. So loud that at first he didn’t hear the *whirr* of the seeker droids.

Jude Watson

He was leaping before the others, cutting down two in a perfect swoop of the lightsaber. The droids peppered the walls with blaster fire. Smoke rose and the noise was deafening. The images flickered in beautiful colors of blue and rose and green while the shadows of the droids moved in menacing circles. The electric *ping* of the blaster fire crisscrossed the space, and each Jedi had to jump, whirl, and slash at the droids as they dived and circled.

Within minutes, the dozen or so droids were reduced to smoking scrap on the floor. Obi-Wan strode over to a panel behind the door and shut down the holoprojection system.

“Careful, that might be—” Siri started, as a secret blast door opened and three combat droids, the deadly droidekas, wheeled out and clattered to life. Blazing blasterfire raked the area where Obi-Wan had stood. Anyone but a Jedi would have been instantly annihilated.

“Booby-trapped!” Siri yelled, as she dodged the blaster bolts.

With deflector shields in place, droidekas were difficult to stop. While the rest of the Jedi took a step backward, Anakin moved forward. He had studied the droids ever since learning about them, and knew the precise spot where their generators lay. He rolled onto the floor, for only an upward stroke could disable them.

The Force hummed in the room as Anakin deftly inserted his lightsaber once, twice, three times. The roar of blasters ended.

Now the floor was littered with droids. Other than that, the house was empty.

“Let’s search,” Obi-Wan said. “They might have left a clue.”

Siri moved past a table. “The only thing they left was dirty dishes,” she said, disdainfully pointing to several greasy plates on the table.

Other than the signs of a hastily abandoned meal, there wasn’t a trace of the occupants to be found.

“We’ve come up empty again,” Siri said in disgust after a few minutes of searching.

STAR WARS: The False Peace

“It’s Omega’s style,” Anakin said. “He knows how to leave without a trace.”

Ferus nudged a half-open closet door with his foot. “Nothing.”

Obi-Wan drifted to the table. He bent over the dishes. There was a scrap of roll on one plate, and a puddle of sauce on the other. He bent closer and sniffed.

“Gotcha,” he murmured.

“What is it, Master?” Anakin asked, turning.

Obi-Wan pointed to the plate. “That’s Dexter Jettster’s slider garnish. I’d know it anywhere.”

Siri strode over and looked at the plate. “Congratulations. Our best clue is a garnish.”

“It’s a place to start,” Obi-Wan said.

Siri nodded. “Why don’t you and Anakin head over to Dexter’s Diner and ask some questions. I think Ferus and I should study the water delivery system here on Coruscant. We know they’re here. We’d better have a good idea of what damage they could do.”

“Good idea. We’ll be in touch.”

Obi-Wan signaled to Anakin, and they left the house. Dexter’s Diner wasn’t far, lying in nearby Coco Town. They hurried through the crowded pedestrian ramps. The monorails were packed, and it was faster to walk.

They crossed through the plaza on the way to the diner. The buildings ringing the plaza were a mix of low-rent business and dilapidated industrial warehouses. Dexter’s Diner crouched between the bigger buildings, its bright sign casting a red glow through the gray day.

Anakin started toward the door, but Obi-Wan stopped him. “Wait. Look who’s inside.”

Anakin peered into the window. Sitting alone in a booth, both hands cupping a mug, was Astri.

Chapter Eleven

Astri looked up, surprised, when Obi-Wan and Anakin slid into her booth. She had been so lost in thought that she hadn't seen them enter the diner.

"It's funny to see you here," she said to Obi-Wan. "Like a dream. I was just thinking of the old days. Everything is so different now. Even here." She looked around. "Dexter actually made it into a profitable enterprise."

"Well, he doesn't give away meals and drinks the way Didi did," Obi-Wan said.

She smiled. "That's true." She held up her empty cup. "He doesn't even give refills. But I like it here."

"Yes, those *were* good days," Obi-Wan said. "Things *are* more complicated now. Like the fact that your husband is trying to destroy the Jedi Order."

Astri's hands tightened on her cup. "I long ago made it a policy not to discuss Bog's politics."

"So what do you think about, then?" Anakin asked. His question wasn't confrontational. It was easy, interested. Obi-Wan was relieved that his Padawan had interfered so gracefully. He realized that he was deeply angry with Astri. He had expected better of her.

No expectations. Acceptance.

STAR WARS: The False Peace

It was the Jedi way. And sometimes, so very hard to follow.

"My relief work," Astri responded promptly. "The economy of my adopted world, Nuralee, is failing."

"I didn't know that," Obi-Wan said. "The last time I was on Nuralee it was prospering."

She looked down into her empty cup. "That was probably some time ago."

Before Bog took office, Obi-Wan guessed.

"There are many too poor to buy food. I'm here on Coruscant briefly, just to attend a meeting to ask for help from the new All Planets Relief Fund and attend the inaugural ceremony. A Jedi team is acting as couriers and protectors for a shipment of food and medical supplies to Nuralee, and I must return to ensure it gets in the right hands."

"Do you know who they are?" Anakin asked.

"Soara Antana and Darra Thel-Tanis," Astri said. "I am grateful for their help."

You are grateful for the help we give you, but you will not help us. Obi-Wan had the thought but would not say it aloud.

No expectations. Just acceptance.

And as he thought the words, his mind cleared. Now that he was sitting quietly with her, he allowed himself to truly look at her, not just her changed hair and clothes, but what her face revealed. Yes, she was distant and remote. But if he removed his own feelings from the situation, he could see more clearly.

Something was wrong. He was picking up something.

Fear. She was afraid. But of what?

"So you are returning soon," Anakin said.

"The day after tomorrow. I am anxious to see my son and Didi."

Obi-Wan leaned back, still studying Astri without seeming to. She looked away, twining her fingers through the handle of her cup.

Jude Watson

“So has Bog seen what Dex has done to the old place?” Anakin asked in a jovial tone, gesturing toward the red stools and the curved counter.

Excellent, Anakin. A casual question, but it would give them the information they needed to know. Was there a connection between Bog and the safe house?

“Yes, he’s been here.” Astri pushed away her empty cup. The subject of her husband didn’t interest her. But they had the answer they wanted.

Bog had been the one to bring food from Dex’s Diner to Omega and the others. There was a link between them now. Not a link he could prove. But a link.

Astri began to slide out of the booth. “I should go. I’m late. It’s always good to see you, Obi-Wan. Anakin.”

She hurried out the door, not waiting for their good-byes. As she left, she almost collided with a cloaked figure who was also leaving.

Obi-Wan stared after her. Even the way she moved was different. He remembered Astri striding down the streets, her curls flying, her face upturned, her eyes alight, taking everything in. Now she walked with her head down, her hands thrust into the deep pockets of her tunic.

“She’s afraid,” he said out loud.

“Yes,” Anakin said. “But not for herself. For her son.”

Obi-Wan wrenched his gaze from the departing Astri and looked at his Padawan. More and more, he was recognizing that Anakin’s sensitivity to others was growing and surpassing his in some cases. Anakin often seemed to know what secrets were inside others, what drove them to do the puzzling things they did. It had something to do with his command of the Force, but it was more than that.

He remembered the words of Ferus, when he had confessed his doubts about Anakin to Obi-Wan on Romln. He had said that Anakin wanted to control everything. Anakin’s gift of seeing

STAR WARS: The False Peace

inside beings could turn dangerous if he tried to control the feelings he found instead of just observing them.

But that was a Jedi lesson ingrained in every Padawan. Anakin knew that.

“Master, I have to ask you something,” he said now. “Supreme Chancellor Palpatine has offered me a chance to observe the proceedings he attends over the next few days. He thinks I would gain insight into the political arena of the Senate.”

“I agree,” Obi-Wan said. “I have no objections, as long as it doesn’t interfere with our pursuit of Omega. You could learn something valuable that could help us. It is a great honor that Palpatine has bestowed on you, my young Padawan.”

Dexter waddled out from behind the counter, wiping his four hands on his greasy apron.

“Obi-Wan! My friend! Why didn’t you come back to the kitchen and greet me?” Dexter’s wide face creased in an enormous grin. “And you brought the tadpole with you!”

Anakin winced at the nickname. Then he stood up. He had grown since the last time Dexter had seen him, and Dexter burst out with a shout of laughter.

“Well, you showed me, you did, young Skywalker. I’d say you were full-grown now!” He hooked one enormous foot over a chair rail and dragged it over to the booth, then eased his bulk onto it.

“Now, what can I get the two of you—ten-alarm chili? Sliders? I’ve got a stew cooking with bantha meat, cooked long and slow to make it tender. I know they say banthas taste like old boots, but they haven’t tasted Dex’s stew! I’ll tell you my secret, boys.” Dex leaned over. “I leave the hooves in the pot while it’s cooking.”

“Sounds delicious, Dex, but we’ve come for information,” Obi-Wan said quickly, as Anakin’s face paled. “We’re on the trail of some galactic criminals, and we believe they have a taste for your slider garnish.”

Jude Watson

Dex slapped his knees with two of his hands. “And who doesn’t? I’ve got to remember to bottle it. I could make my fortune! One of these days, when I get a minute away from the stove, ha!”

“One of the criminals is Jenna Zan Arbor.”

Dex whistled. “A nasty piece of work. Wouldn’t know her to see her, though. And I haven’t heard she’s back on Coruscant.”

“How about Senator Bog Divinian?”

“Astri Oddo’s husband? Sure, he’s been here. Likes my sliders. You know, some people find them addictive! Picks up his dinner many a time and brings it back to his lodgings.”

Obi-Wan briefly described the Slams. “Have you seen them?”

Dex stroked his chin. “Don’t think so, and haven’t heard of them, either. Hard to say. Here’s the problem—we’ve been too busy here lately to notice much of anything except dirty dishes. And things are set to get even busier tomorrow, because the All Planets Relief Fund Ceremony will be held right across the way.” With one fat finger, Dex pointed out the window to the plaza. “This is the kind of area the Fund will be trying to improve. Anyway, I’ll keep my eye out. Many will be coming to see the big shots like the Chancellor. But most will come, I’d wager, to see a fortune being transferred. Everyone likes to be close to vertex, even if they don’t have any themselves. They feel richer for looking at it—at least until they go home and look around at what they’ve got!” Dex laughed heartily.

Anakin looked at Obi-Wan. Fortune? Vertex? “What do you mean, Dex?” he asked.

“Don’t you know the drill? Every planet in the Senate is donating vertex to the new fund. They present it to Palpatine, and then his personal guard brings it to the vault.” Dex pointed across the plaza. “The Bank of the Core. Now don’t be thinking there will be hanky-panky,” he said, wagging his finger. “There will be security like you’ve never seen. Coruscant security and the Chancellor’s Red Guards. Tomorrow they’ll be cordoning off walkways and placing officers around the plaza. A journalist for

STAR WARS: The False Peace

the HoloNet news even paid me to keep her airspeeder out back so she'd be able to take off quick tomorrow to get to her vidcam studio hookup. I said yes because she was a looker—or maybe it was the credits she put in my hand, ha! Then she goes and parks it so it blocks my food-delivery doors. Left it locked tight as a drum. Now you know I don't stand for that." Dex chuckled. "So I got my pal Acey to break in and I moved it myself behind a dumpster."

Dex's words washed over Obi-Wan. There was something here. Item after item clicked in, but he couldn't add them up.

"Can we see that airspeeder, Dex?"

Dex gave him a puzzled look. "Don't see why, but what I have is yours, Obi-Wan. This way."

Chapter Twelve

Anakin and Obi-Wan followed Dex through the steamy kitchen noisy with clattering pans and spattering grease, through the rear exit doors into the alley. A long airspeeder was parked in an angle, wedged between a dumpster and durasteel trash bins.

"It'll smell like old fish tomorrow, but I can't help it. They can't block my kitchen," Dexter said.

"It's a Ralion B-14." Anakin said.

"Can you show me how it was parked before you moved it, Dex?" Obi-Wan asked.

Dexter stamped his enormous foot. "Right here. In the way."

Obi-Wan bent over and studied a round cover sunk into the duracrete street. He knocked on it with his knuckles. "Utility tunnel."

"For my water delivery," Dexter said. "I know because my water froze last winter, and that's where they crawled down to fix it."

Anakin and Obi-Wan exchanged a glance. It was all adding up.

"Got to check on my stew. You two come in when you have more time. You know I like to feed you." Dexter waddled back into the diner.

STAR WARS: The False Peace

“Must have been Valadon in disguise,” Obi-Wan said. “The airspeeder is for their getaway. And here,” he said, stamping his foot on the cover, “is one of the entrance points for the Zone, most likely.”

Anakin prowled around the airspeeder. “Doesn’t seem to be juiced up, at least on the outside. No extra exhaust valves. Seats four, five in a crunch.” He opened the door and slid inside.

Obi-Wan entered the speeder from the other end. “Looks clean.”

“Fully fueled,” Anakin noted.

Obi-Wan reached over toward the door on his side. Something had drifted down to the floor when he’d opened the door, the tiniest wisp of a thing. Attuned to notice every scrap, he bent over to pick it up. It was a thread. He held it up. Blue.

“Anything?” Anakin asked.

“I’ll send it to the Temple lab for analysis, but it looks like standard cloth,” Obi-Wan said, carefully placing it in his utility belt. “Certainly not the septsilk and veda cloth that both Zan Arbor and the Slams like to wear.”

Anakin murmured a reply, busy studying the engine specs. “This doesn’t make sense,” he said. “The transport body style doesn’t fit the engine. In speeders, you maximize every particle of space. I’d guess there is about three centimeters unaccounted for.”

“That’s not very much.”

“Oh, yes it is.” Anakin looked over at his Master. “It’s just like the Slams’ ship. They knew how to hide secret compartments in tiny spaces.”

Anakin was already reaching under the dash. Obi-Wan felt along the floor and the edges of his seat. He had found a few compartments on the Slams’ ship, but Anakin had found all of them.

“Got it.” A drawer popped out toward Anakin. He reached inside, then tossed an item to Obi-Wan.

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan examined the palm-sized datapad. He switched it on. “It’s a map of the plaza,” Obi-Wan said as he accessed the file. “With notations on street closings and space lanes.” Obi-Wan pressed a few more indicators. “And the water transport tunnels are marked.”

“Omega, Zan Arbor, and the Slams are planning to heist the new Relief Fund treasury,” Anakin said. “That’s what they’re after. Not only will it give them a fortune to operate with, it will embarrass Palpatine.”

“It will be a political victory as well as a personal one. That’s most likely why Bog and Sauro got involved—they are looking at a way to strike a blow against Palpatine. And if they profit from it as well, why not?”

“With the help of the Zone, a small band like the Slams can get around the entire Coruscant security force,” Anakin said, shaking his head.

Obi-Wan nodded. “And in his arrogance, Omega expects to defeat the Jedi, too. If the Jedi Order allows the heist to happen, they will be disgraced. That will help Bog and Sauro pass their petition—or win a no-confidence vote against the Chancellor.”

His eyes gleamed at Anakin, and Anakin caught the spark. He felt a spurt of excitement. The pieces were falling into place.

“At last we are one step ahead of Omega,” Obi-Wan said. “Now all we have to do is set the trap.”

Chapter Thirteen

Anakin expected his Master to explode into movement. Obi-Wan never wasted time. Instead, Obi-Wan just looked at him.

“So?”

“So?” Anakin asked cautiously.

“What next?”

“You want me to decide?”

Obi-Wan nodded. “When you become a Jedi Knight, you’ll have to strategize as well as act.”

There were a number of things to be done, and at first, they crowded Anakin’s brain so that he wasn’t sure which to do first. But then a moment later everything was clear and he knew what to do.

“First, we should contact Siri and Ferus and tell them what we know, so that they can concentrate their study of the water system on the area around the plaza,” Anakin said. “Then, we should contact Master Windu. The Jedi Council needs to come up with its own plans to protect the vertex during the ceremony.”

“Good.”

“And we should request a meeting with Chancellor Palpatine,” Anakin went on. “It’s the only way we can get across the seriousness of what we think is going to happen. After all, it’s

Jude Watson

just guesswork, and it could be easily dismissed. But we should be able to convince him to increase security and put monitors on the water systems. Though..." Anakin tapped his fingers on the dashboard. "...if we do nothing and simply allow them to sabotage the system with the Zone, we have an advantage."

Obi-Wan frowned. "We do?"

"The Jedi will not be affected, but our enemy won't know that. Omega and the Slams will be lulled into the belief that they have succeeded. In other words, we give them what they want in the beginning. But we control the outcome."

"But Anakin, that means exposing thousands of beings to the Zone."

"It's not toxic. The beings will have an extraordinarily pleasant morning, that's all."

Obi-Wan's frown grew deeper. "We don't know that. You experienced it early on. We don't know what Zan Arbor has done to it since then. Are you forgetting the four workers who died?"

"But we have every reason to believe the system has been perfected." Anakin hesitated. He could see that he had displeased his Master. "But of course we don't know that for sure. So we must guard the entry ports to the system so the Zone cannot be deployed."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Anything else?"

Anakin thought briefly. "No. Not at the moment."

"I agree. Let's go."

They headed for the Senate. While Obi-Wan called ahead to request a meeting with Chancellor Palpatine, Anakin brooded on his mistake. He had seen the uneasiness in his Master's eyes, though it had passed quickly. Sometimes he made mistakes and wasn't sure why they were wrong. He knew that his Master's deepest desire was to capture Omega. Anakin wondered how much it was permissible to risk in order to accomplish that. How much risk was too much? Who was best to judge? He wished he

STAR WARS: The False Peace

could ask Obi-Wan those questions, but he didn't want to displease him further.

As soon as they arrived at the Chancellor's office, they were ushered in to see him. He stood at the large window behind his desk, ready to receive them.

"Sly Moore tells me this is urgent," he said. "She is not accustomed to such vehemence. I hope it's not bad news."

"Well, that depends," Obi-Wan said. Quickly, he filled Palpatine in on what they had discovered and what they suspected.

"Naturally," Obi-Wan concluded, "the best thing to do is to cancel the ceremony."

"I think not," Palpatine said. "This fund has been the result of years of steady work on the part of many worlds. It is a tribute to the very ideals the Galactic Senate was founded upon originally—cooperation and benevolence. I hardly think that canceling the ceremony would help us in any way."

Anakin wasn't surprised, and neither was Obi-Wan.

"Then security must be increased," Obi-Wan said.

"I assure you, the best measures are already in place," Palpatine said. "And I have every confidence in the Jedi's abilities to forestall these villains."

"Then the water system should be shut off in that quadrant."

"And disrupt thousands of lives?" Palpatine looked impatient. "We will monitor the system, of course. Place guards on the entry points. That won't be difficult. If we know there will be an attempt, we will be able to foil it. Now, I have the distasteful task of having to attend a procedural hearing with Senator Divinian." Palpatine directed his gaze at Obi-Wan. "May I borrow your apprentice? I think it could be a valuable experience for him."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I'll return to the Temple and talk to Master Windu and Siri," he told Anakin. "Keep in contact."

Anakin watched Obi-Wan stride out of the office. He would rather be leaving with him, but he had asked to be included in the Chancellor's meetings, so he had to go.

Jude Watson

“Capturing this Omega is important to your Master,” Palpatine remarked as they left the office and started down the hall.

“It’s important to the galaxy,” Anakin said. “He’s a dangerous enemy.”

“Yes, but not the *most* dangerous enemy,” Palpatine said. “From my experience, the most dangerous enemy is the one you can’t see.”

They drew up in front of a hearing room and walked inside. It was small and private. A long table took up most of the room, with seats equipped with repulsorlift motors that could adjust to the differing heights of many species. Bog sat in a seat at the center of the long table, with Bail Organa opposite him.

Bog spoke into his data recorder in a low tone. “Supreme Chancellor arrived. Meeting will start on time.”

Chancellor Palpatine sat at the head of the table and indicated that Anakin take a seat behind him. Bog half-rose, then sat again, as if uncertain what protocol to follow.

“I am here as the head of the Senate investigating committee on Jedi Order abuses,” Bog began. “The committee has entered its findings and has delivered an official petition to ban the Jedi from future Senate business. We request from the Supreme Chancellor an override of Senator Organa’s counter-petition to stall our petition in a separate committee. We believe it must be debated in the full Senate and acted upon immediately.”

Palpatine turned. “Senator Organa?”

“Senators from two hundred planets have signed a protest and request to investigate the petition committee for undue bias in its deliberations,” Organa said. “Until that investigation is concluded, the Senate can hardly debate the recommendations of the committee. Let alone vote on the issue.”

“I have reached a ruling,” Palpatine said.

Bog and Organa looked surprised.

STAR WARS: The False Peace

“Th-the Supreme Chancellor has hardly had enough time to consider...I have not had a chance to refute...” Bog stammered in confusion.

Palpatine held up a hand. “Relax, Senator Divinian. I rule that you may enter, debate, and vote on the petition to bar the Jedi Order from any further action on behalf of the Galactic Senate.”

Palpatine rose, as Bog looked pleased and Bail Organa looked stunned.

“The vote should take place quickly—” Bog urged.

“I agree. The debate and vote shall take place tomorrow after the All Planets Relief Fund ceremony.”

Bog stood and bowed. “Thank you for your ruling, Supreme Chancellor. I assure you it is in the best interests of the Senate.”

“I assure you that the best interests of the Senate are always my first concern,” Palpatine replied, and swept out.

Anakin followed him hastily. He was surprised and dismayed by the meeting. He had expected to hear a spirited debate, and hoped to see the justly renowned Bail Organa in action. But he never expected that Palpatine would rule for Bog.

“You look lost, Anakin,” Palpatine said with a slight smile as Anakin swung into step beside him.

“Well, I have to admit I’m surprised. Why did you allow Bog to win?”

“I gave Bog what he wanted because I am sure he will fail,” Palpatine replied.

Anakin was suddenly struck. Wasn’t this what he had suggested to Obi-Wan earlier? He had wanted to do the same for their enemy, Omega.

“Bog doesn’t know it, but he just destroyed his career,” Palpatine said.

Palpatine wasn’t gloating, Anakin thought. That would be beneath him. But he did look rather...satisfied.

He remembered back on Romin, when he had felt a surge of power, realizing that the Force could not only allow him to move objects, but also to see into motivations and consequences. Many

Jude Watson

beings were transparent in their greed and ego, just as Bog was. Thinking several steps ahead was not that difficult.

Palpatine understood this; did his Master? Obi-Wan was so cautious. Anakin glanced at Palpatine, admiring how he moved through the Senate halls. He did not exaggerate his power but he did not diminish it. He accepted it and accepted the ways in which he would have to use it.

How satisfying it must feel to simply wait for events to unfold as you have foreseen them, Anakin thought. How powerful to know the outcome before it happened. This was what he could learn—and not from his Master. From Palpatine.

Chapter Fourteen

At the Jedi Temple, Obi-Wan pored over the schematics for the water delivery system in the targeted area of Coruscant. Siri and Ferus showed him what they'd learned from the experts they'd consulted.

The laser map was holoprojected, and Siri used a laser pointer as she spoke. "The access points are here, here, and here, including the tunnel outside Dexter's Diner. They're the most likely places to strike. But of course with Omega we have to think of the least likely, too. That would be here and here. We've got Senate security forces on each point. All undercover, highest-level clearance. In addition, we have Jedi teams patrolling."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Looks good."

"What about the thread analysis?" Ferus asked.

"Looks like a dead end," Obi-Wan reported. "A question of too much information rather than too little. The droid analyst says it's common throughout the galaxy. Thousands of uses and manufacturers. The computers are breaking them down into zones of probability, but..."

Siri looked back at the holoprojection map. "We have everything covered, Obi-Wan."

"But you do not feel secure."

Siri's eyebrows knit together. "No."

Jude Watson

“Nor do I.”

Ferus hooked his fingers into his utility belt. “I have a feeling none of us will be sleeping tonight.”

Obi-Wan and Anakin spent the night patrolling the streets and sky lanes. Keeping out of sight, the Jedi made sure the water delivery system remained untouched. Master Windu had allocated the necessary resources to do so. Nevertheless, Anakin and Obi-Wan watched the watchers. They did not know when Omega’s team would strike, but they felt they could not trust anyone else to be fully prepared. They knew Omega’s cunning.

The first rays of the sun were flashing on the Temple spires as Obi-Wan and Anakin returned from their rounds. Waiting for them in the Great Hall were Jedi Master Soara Antana and her apprentice, Darra Haariden.

Anakin hurried forward to greet his friend Darra. He had barely seen her since their mission to Norah, where she’d been wounded.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“Running on a full tank,” she replied, her eyes smiling.

Meanwhile, Obi-Wan drew Soara aside.

“Thank you for coming so quickly,” he said. “Is everything...”

Soara nodded. “They’re having breakfast at the moment. Master Alann is with them.”

Anakin overheard and shot his Master a curious look, but Obi-Wan merely said, “Meet us at Dexter’s Diner at the prearranged time.”

Anakin joined Obi-Wan. He raised his eyebrows in a question.

“The fear you saw on Astri’s face,” Obi-Wan said grimly. “I want to make it go away.”

STAR WARS: The False Peace

It took some persuading, but Astri agreed to meet him. Obi-Wan waited outside Dexter's Diner. When he saw her approach, he walked forward to greet her.

"Obi-Wan, I can't interfere with Bog, even for you," she said before he could speak. "I'm a Senator's wife now."

"Why can't you meet my eyes, Astri?" he asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, but her gaze kept moving.

"Are you afraid you were followed?"

"No. I took precautions." Astri saw her mistake. She bit her lip.

"You are afraid," Obi-Wan said. "Don't worry, you weren't followed. There are Jedi watching your every move now. And yet you still can't meet my eyes."

All he could see was the top of her head. The dark curls that once tumbled down her back were now cropped close against her skull. He remembered when she had shaved off her hair in order to impersonate a bounty hunter. Astri had never had much vanity. She was a pure spirit, and he had misjudged her.

"I am ashamed," she said quietly. "That is why I can't meet your eyes."

He took her arm and led her into the shelter of the diner overhang. "There is no need for shame, old friend," he said softly. "We have been through worse together."

She shook her head. "No. We have not." She looked up, and he saw that her deep green eyes glistened with tears. "Now I have a child."

"And Bog has threatened him."

"He will take him away. He is so young, Obi-Wan. I cannot let that happen. No matter what. Even your friendship, even the entire Jedi Order is nothing to me in the face of that. I know that making a choice for one life against so many lives is wrong, but I cannot help myself." This time, she did not drop her eyes.

"Astri, that is not a cause for shame. I understand it. Of course that is what you must do."

"You understand that I couldn't help you?"

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan nodded. "And you must understand that I must help *you*."

"There is no help for me. Even from the Jedi."

"Look." He took her by the shoulders and spun her around. Now she could see inside the diner. Her father, Didi, was comparing recipes with Dexter. Lune, her son, was sitting on a stool, swinging his legs as Darra teased him, making him laugh. A large plate of Dex's special cakes sat in front of the child. He picked up a piece with his fingers and ate it, then licked his fingers.

Astri put a hand on her heart.

"I had Soara and Darra bring them. We can arrange to have them back before anyone knows they are missing, if that is your choice. But there is another."

Astri waited, her eyes drinking in the sight of her son.

"You can leave Bog. The Jedi will offer you protection."

She was already shaking her head. "He will find me. He will win." She turned. "You don't understand, Obi-Wan. He's not as stupid as he appears. He is cunning. I didn't realize...I didn't know...the lengths he would go. He got one taste of power, and it corrupted him. He has aligned himself with the worst in the galaxy. It started so softly. A favor for the Commerce Guild. Then another. And soon he was approached by another Senator—"

"Sano Sauro."

"Yes. He sold his honor. Well, the honor I thought he had. And now there is someone else, someone so powerful he does not say his name."

"Granta Omega. And with Omega, Jenna Zan Arbor. Did you know that?"

Astri looked away. "Yes. I knew that. And still I did nothing."

He slipped his hand into her cold one and squeezed it briefly. "You were alone. Now you are not. You still have me."

"Bog was never a strong man," she said. "How strange it is to fear him now."

STAR WARS: The False Peace

She reached into the pocket of her tunic and handed several disks to Obi-Wan.

“What is this?”

“Bog’s data recorder. For his memoirs.” She made a face. “I copied them secretly. He says it only keeps a record of meetings, but that’s not true. He is too vain to hide what he thinks of as his accomplishments. There might be something on these.”

Obi-Wan slipped them into his tunic. “You didn’t know I had brought Lune and Didi here. Why did you bring the disks?”

“I’ve been carrying them with me. Seeing you, I felt so guilty, going along with Bog. I thought, there must be a way to help somehow. Bog is involved in something terrible. It is more than scheming against the Jedi in the Senate. There is some kind of plot, a takeover that will net him more power. He can’t resist boasting to me. Soon we’ll be able to afford whatever we want. A luxury cruiser for our trips to Nuralee. A villa by the Sea of Translucency on Dremulae.”

“Dremulae?”

“Yes, he saw an image of the perfect spot, he said.”

Yes, Obi-Wan thought, *in Omega’s safe house.*

“He has these grand plans. And he’s questioned me closely about the details of what will take place during the Relief Fund ceremony. I was on the planning committee. I can’t imagine what that means.”

“I can,” Obi-Wan said. “Astri, I promise you, after today you will not have to worry about Bog Divinian.”

She looked up into his face. Something came over her, some jolt of courage or certainty, and she nodded. “Thank you, old friend.”

“And now,” Obi-Wan said in a lighter tone, “it is time to greet your son. I think he’s almost out of cakes.”

Chapter Fifteen

Everything was in place. Secret security milled in the crowd. There were infrared sensors on the gravsled with the treasury. Extra guards in the Core Bank itself. Droids buzzed overhead as thick as flies.

Obi-Wan stood to the side. In his ear was an earpiece in which Bog Divinian's voice droned on. Bog's recordings were filled with the dullest details, from when he took a tea break to the compliment paid him by the visiting ruler of Teevan. Obi-Wan noted that he even planned how late to be for the Senate hearing on the anti-Jedi petition. Six minutes. Short enough so that no one would be offended, long enough to demonstrate his importance, Obi-Wan guessed.

None of the information was useful, and none of it was valuable, including Bog's insights into Senate politics. Still, Obi-Wan continued to listen. He had given a copy to Tyro, but he wanted to hear for himself.

The speeches on the platform were only slightly more interesting. One Senator after another came up and thanked the others and Palpatine, even while managing to convey that it was through his or her own early support that the idea really took off.

In his ear, Bog worked on a speech. Obi-Wan could even hear his footsteps as he paced.

STAR WARS: The False Peace

In this time of great grief and sorrow...

No. In this perilous time, we look to a leader who can take us from strong to stronger...

No, that's not quite the tone. More...leaderlike.

Now only one of us can lead us through the valley of fear to the mountaintop of solidarity...

Obi-Wan switched off the recorder. Chancellor Palpatine was speaking, which meant the ceremony was almost over.

"I accept this treasury on behalf of the Senate, and thank all the generous worlds that contributed," Palpatine said, with one hand on the armored repulsorlift wagon that held the glittering gold boxes of vertex. "This is the dawn of a new age. An age where help will arrive when and where it is most needed. Thank you all."

Palpatine, at least, had learned the value of brevity and modesty, Obi-Wan noted.

He watched as the Supreme Chancellor stepped back and entered his personal transport. He sped off toward the Senate. The others Senators followed. There was a debate to attend.

The Blue and Red Guards, Palpatine's personal guards, slowly guided the vehicle to the great open doors of the vault of the Core Bank. Obi-Wan felt a murmur go through the crowd. Dex was right. There was nothing like a huge fortune to cause beings to swoon.

And still there was no sign of trouble. Obi-Wan saw Siri through the crowd. She shrugged. Anakin had his gaze fixed on the vault.

Obi-Wan's comlink signaled. It was Tyro.

"Anything?" Obi-Wan asked.

"That speech he's practicing...did you get to that yet? Any impressions?"

"He needs a speechwriter."

"Yes, it's awful, but did you get the subject?"

"No, I couldn't figure out what he was talking about. It didn't make sense."

Jude Watson

“That’s what worries me.”

Obi-Wan watched the Guards move into the building. “So what’s your point?”

“Well, what’s *his* point, that’s the question. Obi-Wan, this may be off-base, but...”

Obi-Wan noticed that one of the Blue Guards had a torn hem. Unusual for these guards. They took their position as personal guards to Palpatine seriously.

Torn hem. Blue thread.

“Later, Tyro.” Obi-Wan snapped his comlink shut and vaulted through the crowd. Anakin caught his movement.

“The guards!” he bellowed.

And then they were all moving—Anakin, Siri, Ferus, as the durasteel doors began to slide shut on the vault.

Obi-Wan leaped. He slammed against the vault door, then squeezed himself inside, nearly leaving his foot behind as the door clanged shut. Anakin was above him, timing his own leap to slither through the doors as they closed.

Obi-Wan landed on the floor and tackled the Blue Guard in front of him. The helmet was knocked off, and he looked into the face of Roper Slam.

“Not you again!” Slam groaned.

Anakin tackled the next guard. It was Slam’s sidekick, Valadon.

“This was supposed to be *easy*!” Slam yelped.

Valadon struggled to release herself from Anakin’s grip. “What happened to that Zone? We weren’t supposed to meet any resistance!”

“We’ve been double-crossed,” Slam said. He didn’t struggle with Obi-Wan. He sat cross-legged on the floor, then tried to rip off the robe in angry frustration.

Siri and Ferus ran in through the interior door of the vault, followed by anxious-looking officials and part of the security force.

STAR WARS: The False Peace

"It's all right," Obi-Wan said. "You can take them into custody."

"There wasn't even an attempt to hit the water system," Siri said.

"You see? Double-crossed," Slam said, slumping down.

"Another two minutes and we would have been out of here with the vertex," Valadon said.

"Everything depends on minutes, Val," Slam said. "We live and die on minutes."

Minutes, Obi-Wan thought.

Bog is going to be six minutes late for the debate.

To make himself more important? Or was there another reason?

Now only one of us can lead us through the valley of fear to the mountaintop of solidarity...

It doesn't make sense. That's what worries me...

The truth blazed a path inside his brain. Bog was practicing a *nominating* speech. A speech he would deliver sometime today.

The heist was yet another diversion.

The nominating speech was for Sano Sauro to take over as Supreme Chancellor.

The real mission was to assassinate Supreme Chancellor Palpatine.

Chapter Sixteen

Anakin's head whipped around. One moment Obi-Wan was there, standing over Roper Slam, and the next, he was gone.

Anakin whirled and charged out the door of the vault, into the Core Bank building itself. He was just in time to see his Master racing out the front door.

Anakin put on a burst of speed. Obi-Wan was doing three things at once. He leaped over four chatting security officers straight onto an unattended swoop, even while he slipped his comlink out of his belt and spoke rapidly into it. At the same time, he started the swoop engine.

Anakin jumped onto an empty swoop and revved the engine, lifting into the sky just as a security officer yelled, "Hey!"

Within seconds, he had caught up to his Master.

"What's up?" Anakin asked easily, even though they were going the wrong way down a space lane.

Obi-Wan went into a screeching dive to avoid a crowded airbus. When Anakin caught up, he said, "I think Omega's real goal is to use the Zone at the Senate and assassinate Palpatine. I've already tried to call Senate security, but I can't get through. All of security is caught up in the ceremony."

STAR WARS: The False Peace

“Which is probably what he’s counting on. We’d better hurry, then.” Anakin pushed the speed on his swoop. Obi-Wan did the same.

They looped, dove, and flew flat-out, dipping out of the space lane to do some highly illegal flying over the pedestrian walkways leading to the Senate. Obi-Wan leaped off the swoop as it was still flying and held out a hand, using the Force to guide it to a safe stop. Anakin followed.

They ran into the Senate building, past the enormous statues. As he ran, Obi-Wan contacted Siri and told her what he suspected.

“I’ll contact Master Windu and head to the Senate. We’ll need backup. The head of security is here, I’ll talk to him.”

“Do what you can.” Obi-Wan shoved his comlink into his belt.

“How do you think they’ll do it?” Anakin asked as they ran along the elevated walkway leading to Palpatine’s private office.

“They’ll use the Zone to impair the opposition Senators. They will have figured out a way to target them somehow, maybe by inviting them to the meeting first. That’s why Bog is going to be late. Then they’ll call for a vote and oust the Jedi Order. In the meantime, they’ll assassinate Palpatine.”

“So they will have eliminated Jedi interference and Palpatine in one day,” Anakin said.

“And Sano Sauro will be Supreme Chancellor.”

They raced into Palpatine’s outer office. Sly Moore gazed at them forbiddingly, her pale eyes showing her disapproval. “Not another emergency meeting. The Supreme Chancellor is busy.”

“This is life or death,” Obi-Wan told her.

She hesitated a fraction of an instant. “He has already gone to the Jedi vote in the Senate. He took the South Corridor!” she shouted after them as they ran.

They raced down the hallways. They couldn’t be too late. They couldn’t let Omega win.

Jude Watson

Ahead they saw Palpatine walking. Obi-Wan skidded up to him and pushed him into an empty meeting room. When he touched his arm, he was shocked at how thin the Supreme Chancellor was. Yet his arm was like a braiding of durasteel, ropy and strong. Something clanged along Obi-Wan's nerves, some feeling, some instinct that made him want to recoil. He felt dread well up in him, and he wondered if he was too late, after all. Perhaps there was something he had not seen. Was he missing something? Obi-Wan felt suddenly confused.

"Master Kenobi, what is it?" Palpatine asked. He had moved his arm away quickly and was now adjusting the high collar on his cloak.

"An assassination plot against you, Supreme Chancellor," Obi-Wan said. "Granta Omega is behind it. I am sure of it. Sano Sauro would be nominated by Bog Divinian as your successor."

Palpatine thought this over. A small smile crossed his thin, bloodless lips. "Of course. That would be the inevitable next step."

"You don't seem very concerned about your potential assassination," Anakin said.

Palpatine waved a hand. "My personal safety ceased to be an issue the moment I took on this position."

An odd thing to say, Obi-Wan thought, for a man who had developed his own security force, the Red Guard, whose masked members used force pikes as weapons.

"I'll order a lockdown," Palpatine said. "That means every door will open only with a retinal scan."

"Omega and Zan Arbor are probably already in the building," Obi-Wan said. "My guess is that Teda got them past security."

"I have monitors on the water system," Palpatine said. "There are no reports of sabotage."

"I advise you to shut down the entire system," Obi-Wan said. "We can't take a chance."

Palpatine hesitated. Then he got out his comlink, notified Mas Amedda, and gave the order.

STAR WARS: The False Peace

“And now I will go to the assembly,” he said.

“But Supreme Chancellor, you can’t,” Obi-Wan argued.

“But Master Kenobi, I must,” Palpatine said softly. For the first time in his acquaintance with the Supreme Chancellor, Anakin sensed something underneath his composure—just a hint of anger, striking as fast as a serpent, and then gone.

A red light began to glow on Palpatine’s comlink.

“The most serious alert,” he murmured, and accessed it. He listened for a moment, then shut it down.

“It could be nothing. A valve in a water tunnel won’t function. They wouldn’t have noticed it, but when they shut down the water system, the valve came up as nonfunctioning.”

“Where?”

Palpatine gave him the coordinates, and Obi-Wan turned to Anakin. “Stay with the Chancellor.”

“But Master—”

“Anakin, stay! Don’t leave him!” Obi-Wan’s order floated back to Anakin as his Master ran off.

Chapter Seventeen

Stay.

Obi-Wan was off to face Granta Omega, and Anakin was now just a *bodyguard*.

Palpatine's pale gaze studied him.

"You can go."

"I can't disobey my Master. I can't leave you alone."

"If I call my Red Guard they can be here in three minutes. Less."

"It would not matter," Anakin said miserably. "Obi-Wan told me to stay."

"Well, let us walk, then. I am scheduled to preside over the vote on Senator Divinian's proposal."

"But my Master told you not to go."

"True. But unlike you, I do not have to obey an order of caution."

Caution. Obi-Wan's caution drove Anakin crazy.

"The work of the Senate goes on," Palpatine continued as they began to walk. "To keep going on, no matter what the obstacles—that is what a leader must do. I have learned, Anakin, over the course of my political career, one important thing: I cannot let anyone get in the way of my service. In the beginning, I doubted myself. Who am I, I asked myself, to decide fates, to

STAR WARS: The False Peace

make rulings? Then the answer came to me. I must do it because there is no one else who can do it better.” Palpatine chuckled. “Oh, I’m not saying I’m keeping the Republic together singlehandedly. But fate has thrust me into this position—and I would be untrue to myself as well as the galaxy if I did not utilize everything I have and everything I am in order to succeed at it.”

Palpatine’s serenity was almost eerie. It was as though, Anakin thought suddenly, Palpatine was *above* this, looking down. As though criminals like Granta Omega were merely toys to be observed. Where did he get that confidence? Anakin was reaching out blindly, trying to probe the Supreme Chancellor, but his powers were not that developed. He kept meeting a wall.

“What I wish,” Palpatine said, “is that you will realize this one day, too. That it is right to use every means at your disposal. I’m sure your Master would agree.”

Anakin had his doubts. He saw Siri and Ferus pounding down the hallway.

“Ah,” Palpatine said. “Reinforcements.”

Siri halted in front of them. “Where is Obi-Wan?”

“There was a security breach and he went to check it out,” Anakin explained.

“Coordinates,” Siri rapped out.

Anakin gave them to her, and she turned to Ferus. “Stay here with the Supreme Chancellor. I’ll contact you if you’re needed.”

Ferus nodded. He did not seem to have the same conflict about the order that Anakin did. Siri raced down the hall.

“You go, too, Anakin,” Palpatine urged him. “One Jedi is enough protection.”

Anakin hesitated. He would be disobeying a direct order from Obi-Wan. But Obi-Wan had given the order before Ferus had shown up. And even though Palpatine had dismissed the idea that the water valve malfunction could be a security breach, Anakin felt in his bones that it was Omega, just as Obi-Wan had.

“If it is Omega, he is too dangerous an opponent to allow to escape,” Palpatine said. “The future of the Senate is at stake.”

Jude Watson

Ferus said nothing. His dark eyes moved from Palpatine to Anakin. He knew that whatever he said, Anakin would not take it into consideration.

Anakin made his decision. He turned to Ferus. “I have to go. Don’t leave his side.”

He didn’t have time to wonder if Ferus was annoyed that he had given a fellow Padawan an order. He felt the urgency of his mission. Everything in him pointed the way to a showdown with Omega. And it was just as Palpatine had said: Only he knew what he was capable of. Only he knew the right thing to do.

Chapter Eighteen

Obi-Wan splashed through the water tunnel. There were only a few centimeters of water on the bottom, but the tunnel was sweating water, and it dripped steadily on his head and down his neck. He had examined the valve that caused the malfunction alarm, and he was almost certain it had been caused by a blow, probably from a tool. There was a deep, fresh scratch on the valve, and part of the edge of it was bashed in, lying flush against the tunnel itself, making it impossible to open it. Had Omega and Zan Arbor attempted to open the valve and failed? Was the damage a result of frustration, or miscalculation?

It didn't matter. What mattered was that they were here.

The sound of dripping water magnified in his ears until the soft *plinks* sounded like loud *clangs*. There were so many branches of the tunnel that he wasn't even sure where the main tunnel ran. He wasn't lost, exactly—not yet—but he wasn't terribly comfortable with his sense of direction at this point. Obi-Wan splashed down another quarter-kilometer. He had to go slowly, for fear of making too much noise, but at this rate, he'd never find them. The Senate complex was as large as a mid-sized city on some planets. If Omega and Zan Arbor decided to hide, it could take some time before he could find them.

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan's comlink signaled, and he grabbed it. It was Tyro. The reception was poor, and the com line crackled.

"Obi-Wan, I must meet with you. Where are you?"

"In the water tunnels. Tyro, I don't have time—"

"Listen to me. I've dug back, looking for links. And I stumbled on something. Something...much more...terrible."

Even through the poor connection, Obi-Wan heard the fear in Tyro's voice. "I know about the assassination plot on Palpatine," Obi-Wan told his friend.

"What? No..." The comlink crackled again. "...can't talk about it over a comlink. We must meet. This involves the highest level...great evil..."

"I know, Tyro!" Obi-Wan hissed into the comlink, exasperated. "Sano Sauro!"

"...only you can truly understand..." Tyro said through the static.

"Tyro? I can't pick up what you're saying! I'll get back to you as soon as I can." Obi-Wan shut off the transmission. He saw a schematic blueprint on the side of the tunnel, and he hurried over to examine it.

The blueprint was fashioned by raised laser lines that responded to touch. When Obi-Wan touched one part of the blueprint, it lit up in far more detail.

Just like the blueprint at the factory on Falleen.

They had used the same system to map the tunnels. Did that mean that the tunnels in the factory on Falleen corresponded to the Senate tunnels?

Obi-Wan touched the area he was standing in. The tunnel design appeared, with all the different branches.

He didn't recognize the design. It was different from the one on Falleen. But that didn't mean that another quadrant wouldn't match. If he found the quadrant that they'd built on Falleen, he'd know which way Zan Arbor and Omega were going.

Which meant he would have to flash through each quadrant of the Senate water system until he found the one that matched.

STAR WARS: The False Peace

Obi-Wan scanned the menu. There were five hundred and seventy-two separately designated quadrants to the system. It would take too long for him to stand here and try to match them.

Obi-Wan studied the tunnel around him in frustration. The answer was here. Somewhere. There was something he wasn't seeing.

He closed his eyes, remembering the tunnel on Falleen. Had there been a clue there that he had missed?

In his mind, he saw the tunnel he was standing in and matched it to the one on Falleen. Something was different, he knew. What? Suddenly, he realized something crucial.

Vents.

The Senate water tunnel had no vents. Of course not. It had valves to regulate water flow.

The tunnel on Falleen had vents.

Obi-Wan bent forward and accessed the grid again. He saw on the menu that the air and water tunnels were stacked on top of one another. There were several linking passageways for workers to get from one to the other. He pressed the key for the air tunnel quadrant nearest to where he was standing.

It was the same grid.

Obi-Wan realized then what he should have realized on Falleen. Zan Arbor had attempted to transmit the Zone through water to a large population. She had failed.

TRACK A EXPERIMENT VOIDED.

TRACK B EXPERIMENT BEGUN.

Track A had been transmission through water. It had failed. Four deaths were the result.

Track B had been transmission through air.

Obi-Wan's conclusions thudded through his brain with sickening logic.

Zan Arbor and Omega knew he was expecting them to attack through water.

They had wanted the Senate water tunnels to be shut down.

Jude Watson

It was their way in. And while the water tunnels were being searched, they would release the Zone into the air.

He studied the blueprint again, then whipped out his comlink as he ran. He could not get through. He was too deep in the system now.

He ran along the tunnel until he saw the light indicating a pass-through to the air tunnels. He accessed the door and rushed through, then jumped on a constantly moving platform that took him up to the air transport systems. Obi-Wan raced through a circular door into the air tunnel.

He remembered the blueprint perfectly. If he took a left turn, then a right, he would arrive in the main air tunnel. The one that went to the main Senate chamber.

He ran down the tunnel, his footsteps making no noise. Before long he heard a faint humming noise.

A speeder bike.

He took the next turn and saw them. Zan Arbor and Omega, traveling at low speed through the tunnel.

He accessed the Force and leaped, throwing himself through the air, straight at the speeder.

Chapter Nineteen

Obi-Wan hit the end of the vehicle and grabbed on to the edge of the backseat. The speeder lurched with the impact and collided with the wall in a shower of sparks.

In the pilot seat, Granta Omega took a backward glance and saw him. A look of rage transfixed his features into a snarling mask.

“Granta, watch out!” Zan Arbor screamed.

The tunnel curved and now the speeder was heading straight for the wall. Omega jerked the controls. The rear fishtailed wildly, tossing Obi-Wan back and forth. He scrambled toward the third seat in the rear.

Zan Arbor took out a blaster. Obi-Wan activated his lightsaber while she lifted it to aim. He swung, deflecting fire, but it was hard to hold on with one hand and he knew he wouldn’t be able to do it for long.

“Faster!” she shouted to Omega. With the other hand, she took another blaster out of her belt. “Just drive!”

To his surprise, she did not aim the second blaster at him. Omega piloted the speeder bike closer to the walls of the tunnel, and she took aim at the side.

At the vent.

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan realized she wasn't holding an ordinary blaster. It was likely packed with pellets. She was going to shoot into the vent. And right about now, if he remembered the blueprints correctly, they were on a direct line to the main Senate chamber.

"Get closer!" Zan Arbor screamed. She half-stood, half-crouched on the seat, lining up her shot, ignoring Obi-Wan for now. She would only get one chance at the vent.

But Obi-Wan was well aware that Omega had two problems: He had to get close enough for Zan Arbor to shoot, but he had to keep Obi-Wan off balance enough to prevent him from reaching Zan Arbor.

The Force hummed in the tunnel and around him. Time slowed down. Only a second remained until Zan Arbor would take her shot, but that second broke down into smaller pieces of time that Obi-Wan could use.

He could see the vent approaching. He waited until he knew Omega would have to get the speeder closer to the wall. At the moment Omega made the adjustment, Obi-Wan threw himself forward, knocking Zan Arbor off position. With a swift, precise kick, Obi-Wan dislodged the blaster from her hand. It flew out, bouncing against the tunnel wall.

Zan Arbor crouched in the bottom of the speeder, her face contorted in a scream.

"Do it now!" she screamed at Omega.

Of course. Omega would have a blaster, too. He always had a backup.

Omega threw the speeder into reverse. It was careening now, almost out of control, but his arm was steady as he aimed the blaster at the vent.

Again, time moved for Obi-Wan just as he wanted it to move, with spaces in between the seconds for him to exploit. He reached over and pushed the speed lever forward. The speeder went into maximum velocity in reverse.

Obi-Wan was prepared, but Omega and Zan Arbor were thrown forward with the lurch of speed. Omega let go of the

STAR WARS: The False Peace

blaster. Obi-Wan reached up and snatched it out of the air, then tucked it into his utility belt.

Omega tried to push the engines into forward again, but the speeder finally protested and stalled. The engine cut out and the speeder spun crazily, then bounced on the bottom of the tunnel and slammed against the wall.

Omega was already jumping out as the speeder bike died. Obi-Wan leaped after him, but found himself suddenly contending with a dozen miniature seeker droids hammering blaster fire at him. Omega had released them from a compartment on the speeder even as it came to its final stop.

The first dozen were joined by another dozen. Then another. And, Obi-Wan saw in dismay, another. The blaster fire kept Obi-Wan moving, but he could not get anywhere. He had to leap and defend himself against the blaster fire while taking down the elusive droids, who were now between him and the two criminals.

Zan Arbor ran toward Omega. "Let's move on to the exit plan."

Omega stood, watching Obi-Wan contend with the droids. Obi-Wan heard him clearly. "I want to see him die. Not even a Jedi can escape this many seekers."

"Don't be a fool. Come on! Security will be all over us in another minute!" Zan Arbor started to run.

Taking a last look at Obi-Wan, Omega grinned. "Have fun."

Then he turned and started after Zan Arbor.

Obi-Wan leaped into the air, barely missing blaster crossfire. The tunnel was filling with smoke from the heavy fire. He began to regret charging off alone to hunt Omega. Maybe he'd been wrong not to wait for backup...

Jedi do not second-guess.

Especially when they are in a tunnel with thirty-three flying, firing droids.

Three droids in one blow. But there were thirty others, and it would take time.

Jude Watson

Instead of running forward, Obi-Wan retreated. He dashed back to the speeder and threw himself underneath it. His face was directly against the hot metal, his arms and legs squeezed inside so that the blasters could get not direct shots at him.

He heard the blaster fire rake the speeder, front to back, searching for his position. He waited until he heard the distinctive sound of several rounds of blaster fire penetrate the fuel tank.

He had enough time, he had more than enough time, thanks to the Force, but Obi-Wan felt the hair on the back of his neck singe as he flew through the air, escaping the exploding speeder bike. The fireball took out twenty-eight seeker droids at once. Obi-Wan slashed the remaining two as he moved through the air, propelled by the Force and the extremely hot air thrown off by the explosion.

He landed on his feet—singed, but fine.

He started to run, whipping out his comlink as he moved. He knew where they were going. The Senate landing platform.

He tried his comlink, but the heat of the blast had fused it. Obi-Wan tossed it away as he doubled his speed. The landing platform must be ahead. Omega and Zan Arbor had mapped out a plan that would get them inside the air tunnel and then out of the Senate as fast as possible.

Obi-Wan saw an air vent dangling off its hinges. He rushed forward and peered inside. Only a few meters of crawl space separated him from the vast landing platform. He crawled through.

The landing platform was kilometers long, big enough to park space freighters in, though most often it was used for the smaller transports of the Senators and important guests. Vehicles were parked in orderly rows. There was no sign of Omega or Zan Arbor. They were undoubtedly racing toward their transport and he could waste an hour looking for them and never find them. Omega would escape again. He had prevented the Zone from

STAR WARS: The False Peace

penetrating the Senate, and had stopped the assassination of Palpatine—he hoped. Omega was leaving in defeat.

None of that mattered. Defeat or not, Omega was still escaping.

Obi-Wan gathered the Force around him. He had never needed it more. To his surprise, he felt it move like a gathering storm, already powerful but hinting at the greater strength to come.

Anakin.

His apprentice moved out from an aisle of transports, racing toward him. Siri was by his side.

“Palpatine?” he asked Anakin.

“I left him with Ferus,” Anakin replied. “Omega?”

“Here somewhere.” Anakin had left Palpatine? He’d given him a direct order! Of course, Ferus must have arrived, and the situation had changed. But he had wanted Anakin to stay with the Chancellor because if he had missed something, Anakin would still have a chance to foil an attack.

“We tracked you through the tunnel,” Siri said.

Anakin was turning, his eyes raking the platform. Obi-Wan felt the Force build. He reached out, looking at the platform, searching for the dark Force that was here, concealed, trying to hide.

“There.” Anakin pointed. “Third aisle over. Thirty-seven transports down.”

They raced down a parallel aisle, hoping to surprise them.

They stealthily moved around a gleaming transport. Across the aisle, Omega and Zan Arbor were already seated in the cockpit of a sleek space cruiser. Omega was quickly instituting takeoff procedures.

No time for delay or to make a plan. The Jedi charged. Anakin accessed the Force and leaped straight onto the windscreen, startling Zan Arbor, who screamed. Obi-Wan landed on the roof and leaned over. He withdrew his lightsaber, ready to cut a hole in the door panel below. Siri leaped up next to him.

Jude Watson

“It really gets tiresome to be continually underestimated.”

The voice was Omega’s. He was transmitting outside the cockpit.

Grimly, Obi-Wan started to cut.

“Do you really think you have foiled my plans, simply by showing up here? If you cut through that door panel, Obi-Wan, you will kill thousands of Senators.”

Obi-Wan continued to cut.

“Obi-Wan,” Siri whispered.

“That’s right, Master Tachi. This will be a day the Senate will long remember. A bloodbath.”

“He has a transmitting device,” Anakin said from his position outside the windscreen.

Obi-Wan stopped his effort.

“Ah, better. Let me explain. I have programmed hundreds of seeker droids with the vital information to key Senators as well as to Palpatine. All I have to do is push the button.”

Obi-Wan felt rage build up inside him. He could not, would not let Omega blackmail him into letting him escape. But he had no doubt that Omega was telling the truth. It was similar to the way he had orchestrated the death of Jedi Master Yaddle.

He felt the Force move, a boiling mass that caused him and Siri to jump to their feet on top of the cruiser. Anakin was up, hanging in midair for the second it took him to slash through the windscreen directly in front of a shocked Omega. He jumped directly on top of the melted material, material that must have been too hot to stand on. Zan Arbor screamed as the melted windscreen fell into her lap.

Obi-Wan had never seen such speed. Even he could not fully track his apprentice’s movement. Balancing on the lip of the cruiser, faster than sight, Anakin reached in and grabbed the transmitter from Omega’s clutches.

“Whoops, no more button,” he hissed at Omega.

With a cry of rage, Omega triggered the powerful engines. The cruiser shot up so fast all the Jedi slipped off. They fell to

STAR WARS: The False Peace

the ground as Omega took off in a burst of speed, clipping a cruiser's wing as he went and knocking over a row of swoops and disrupting traffic in the nearest sky lanes.

Obi-Wan watched from the floor, momentarily stunned.

Anakin looked at the transmitter in his hand.

"He lied," he said. "The transmitter is locked in position. He has already programmed the droids."

Chapter Twenty

“The fastest way back to the Senate chamber is through the tunnels,” Siri said.

“We don’t know the way,” Anakin said.

“If I know Ferus, he does,” Siri said crisply.

They ran back to the vent and crawled through, then ran down the air tunnel. As she ran, Siri flipped open her comlink and contacted Ferus. Quickly, she filled him in.

“We’re just entering the main Senate chamber,” Ferus said. “There’s no sign of any trouble.”

“Stay with Palpatine. Contact Master Windu and request reinforcements. Can you get us through the tunnels to the chamber?”

“Yes. I loaded the Senate utility tunnels onto my datapad.”

“Bring us in on a middle tier.”

There was a pause of only seconds. “Travel back to the ZM7789 section. Look for vent ZM22899. Go through that one. It will ascend two hundred meters and make a sharp turn to vent UB339. Go through that. Follow that tunnel straight to vent NW993. That comes out into the Senate chamber.”

“Got it.”

They moved fast, running now. Siri kicked in the first vent. This tunnel was large enough for them to walk in, but as Ferus

STAR WARS: The False Peace

had told them, it turned sharply upward for two hundred meters. They used their cable launchers to swiftly vault up.

“A sharp turn here.” Siri kicked in the next vent.

She ran ahead, and Obi-Wan had a chance to talk to Anakin.

“You left the Supreme Chancellor.”

“Ferus was there.”

“You could have contacted me.”

“There wasn’t time.”

“And now there are hundreds of seeker droids heading to the Senate and only one Jedi available to protect Chancellor Palpatine and the Senators.”

Obi-Wan saw Anakin’s mouth tighten. He grew less and less open to correction from his Master. It had been the opposite for Obi-Wan. The longer they were together, the more he welcomed Qui-Gon’s remarks, even when they were critical.

“I’m at the next vent!” Siri cried. “I can hear something. Hurry!”

They scurried through the next vent, then ran down the tunnel to the last one, Siri in the lead. Now they could hear it—blaster fire. Shouts. The random, terrible noise of violent chaos.

They burst out on a mid-level tier of the chamber. The seeker droids were everywhere, looking for their targets. Senators marooned in pods dove to the floor. Bodyguards tried to protect their charges and seeker droids went after them as well.

“I don’t see Palpatine!” Siri yelled. “He’s not in his pod.”

“He could be stuck on one of the tiers,” Obi-Wan said.

Siri called Ferus on the comlink but there was no answer. He was either too busy to answer or his comlink wasn’t functioning.

They didn’t know where to start, so they started where they were. Anakin was a flash in the air as he moved, targeting droids as they dipped and revolved, spraying blaster fire toward their targets. Obi-Wan saw a seeker droid homing in on a Senator cowering in his pod, at least fifty meters below. He jumped off the tier into the pod, taking the droid down in mid-leap.

Jude Watson

Siri leaped from pod to pod, slashing at seeker droids in the air as she went and ricocheting blaster bolts back into the droids. Many exploded as their fire was returned to them. With a quick glance Obi-Wan saw them flame out and fall far below to the ground floor. They were hundreds of meters in the air, and the droids had the advantage. They could fly. The Jedi needed an edge.

Obi-Wan leaped down to the next tier and found a terrified assistant hiding among the opulent drapery of the pod from the planet Belazura. It was still tethered to its docking point.

“Show me the main controls for the pods,” Obi-Wan said.

“I-I” the aide stammered, too terrified to speak.

“Do it now!” Obi-Wan barked.

The durasteel in Obi-Wan’s voice caused the aide to snap to attention. “There’s a control on level 125...”

“Let’s go.”

Obi-Wan leaped into the pod. He pressed the indicator to bring them down ten levels. The pod dropped like a stone.

The pod docked at Tier 125. “Come on,” Obi-Wan said.

The aide darted forward, running low to make himself less of a target. Still, every spray of blaster fire caused him to yelp in fear.

Obi-Wan protected him as they ran. The aide quickly leaped behind a large column. He grimaced when he saw a security officer on the ground, but he moved to a panel in the wall. “Here,” he said, accessing the panel. “These controls can override the individual pod controls.”

Obi-Wan quickly scanned the controls. He pushed several indicators, watching the pods move on a diagram. By moving large blocs of pods, he created a stepping-stone effect throughout the Senate chamber.

“Stay here, you’ll be safer,” he told the aide.

With a glance down at the dead guard at his feet, the young aide nodded shakily. “Whatever you say.”

STAR WARS: The False Peace

Obi-Wan raced back to the tier. He could see that he had been successful. Siri was already jumping from pod to pod, able now to cover more airspace. Anakin was doing the same. When Obi-Wan looked down, he could see, far below, Jedi charging out onto the Senate floor. He saw Shaak Ti leaping onto the pods like steps, moving upward. A team led by Coleman Trebor used the pod controls to move closer to their goal, then leaped into the air to take out two, four, seven, ten seeker droids at once during their descent.

Obi-Wan saw Palpatine at last. He stood on a tier far below, facing out toward the melee. Ferus stood in front of him, angling his lightsaber to fend off blaster bolts fired by the droids. Palpatine hardly noticed the Jedi protecting him. His bleak gaze swept the chamber.

Then Obi-Wan saw Roy Teda on the same tier, making his way forward. A droid was tracking him, Obi-Wan saw, and Teda knew it. He was running for his life.

Omega had betrayed Teda, as he eventually betrayed all who joined forces with him. He had programmed a seeker droid to assassinate Teda, too.

Obi-Wan leaped onto a pod twenty meters down. He knew he was too far to reach the tier in time, but he had to try. As he made his way down, his lightsaber never stopped moving, swiping at the droids who were zeroing in on terrified Senators.

He was close enough now to see the snarl of fury and terror on Teda's face, and suddenly, Obi-Wan guessed his intent. If he was going to go down, he wanted the seeker droid to take down Palpatine, too.

Obi-Wan leaped, then leaped again. Just below, Teda ran. Ferus had turned to deal with a storm of blaster fire from five droids heading his way. Far below Ferus, Siri had seen nothing. Anakin had made his way down to the Senate floor and was on his way back up again. He had landed in a large pod and was in the middle of protecting an entire delegation.

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan continued to make his way down, slicing through droids as he went. The Senate chamber was filled with shouts and screams, the smoke of blasters, and the unmistakable smell of fear.

Teda was only a few steps from Palpatine when Ferus moved. Obi-Wan had never seen him turn, had never seen him notice Teda, yet suddenly, Ferus's arm moved backward. Without even looking, he took out the lead seeker droid that had been targeting Teda.

Then Ferus turned his full attention to the droids. He Force-leaped upward, the bronze glow of his lightsaber a constantly moving presence, arcing and circling, slashing, flipping backward, moving forward.

Even as he leaped down the final meters toward Ferus, Obi-Wan saw the droids fall. Only one remained. Teda drew a blaster to fire at Ferus, but the droid suddenly dipped and fired, and Teda fell, smoke rising from the exit wound in his back. Ferus slashed the droid in half and bent over Teda. Obi-Wan could see by the posture of Ferus's body that it was too late.

Obi-Wan landed at last. "Good work, Ferus."

Ferus's mouth was tight. "I was too late."

Even though Teda was an enemy of the Jedi, Ferus felt he had failed.

Obi-Wan repeated the words he had spoken, this time in a gentle tone. "Good work, Ferus."

Ferus turned to look out over the chamber. "The tide has turned."

The Jedi and security forces were gaining the upper hand. Senators had been herded out of the chamber to safety. Others were being protected. The Jedi teams were now destroying the last of the droids. Obi-Wan glanced quickly over the chamber, searching for a Jedi who might need his help. Suddenly he heard his name being called.

"Obi-Wan!"

It was Tyro. Obi-Wan half-turned, searching for his friend.

STAR WARS: The False Peace

Tyro stood in the back of the tier, half-shrouded in darkness. He darted forward toward Obi-Wan, straight into the path of a seeker droid homing in on Palpatine.

“Tyro, drop!” Obi-Wan shouted, already moving.

Ferus leaped as the droid fired. He deflected the fire from Palpatine, but it was too late for Tyro.

Tyro fell on his knees, riddled with blaster fire.

“NO!” The cry was torn from Obi-Wan’s chest. *No, no, not Tyro, not him, not this, I cannot bear this....*

He ran toward him, his legs propelling him forward while a part of him deep inside was still with dread, knowing what the next seconds would bring.

Tyro met his eyes. There was infinite sadness in his gaze, infinite regret. He opened his mouth but could not speak.

Tyro lifted his hand. It trembled as he opened his palm toward Obi-Wan. He closed his hand into a fist and placed it against his heart.

Then he looked beyond Obi-Wan’s shoulder, behind him. Fear flickered in his eyes. And then he was gone.

Obi-Wan bent over him. He opened his own hand. He closed it. He placed it against Tyro’s chest and bowed his head over his beloved friend. He murmured the words every Svivreni told a loved one before a journey.

“The journey begins,” Obi-Wan whispered. “So go.”

Chapter Twenty-One

The next day, the vote was finally held. There was no debate. Senator Bog Divinian's proposal to bar the Jedi from any action taken on behalf of the Senate was soundly defeated. Even Sano Sauro voted against it. It was noted that the two of them had arrived well after the previous day's events.

Bog was disgraced. Back on his planet, those who had once been his supporters demanded his resignation. Everyone but Bog knew his political career was over.

Because of his coolness on the day of the attempted massacre, Supreme Chancellor Palpatine's stature increased, and he was more powerful than ever. Twenty-one Senators died that day, fourteen aides, and ten Senatorial guards. It was considered a miracle that the numbers weren't higher.

For a day or two, the Senators seemed bound in a common grief. But after the memorials and the speeches were over, the blame began. Who had allowed it to happen? What committee had not foreseen it? What faction had secretly approved of it? Who had not condemned it loudly enough?

Charges and countercharges. Speeches. Lectures. Tirades.

Obi-Wan was sick of it. Sick at heart.

He sat in Tyro's cluttered office. He had attended Tyro's memorial service, which was packed with friends, with more

STAR WARS: The False Peace

spilling out into the hallways, unable to participate or hear, but still wanting, needing to be present. Obi-Wan had no idea that so many had loved him.

But here, among his beloved files and documents, here was where Obi-Wan felt closest to him.

He had thought he couldn't bear this death. But of course he had.

There would be more to bear, he knew. The growing darkness that Master Windu had spoken of was now in his heart. He could feel that darkness with every breath he took.

He had searched through Tyro's files, through his datapad, through everything he could think of. There was no record of what Tyro had been trying to tell him. Obi-Wan could not make sense of it.

I stumbled on something. Something...terrible.

...the highest level...great evil...

...only you can truly understand...

What was it? Obi-Wan silently asked Tyro. *What were you going to tell me?*

He had assumed that the seeker droid that killed Tyro was heading for Palpatine. Yet the Senate investigator had told him that morning that it was programmed to hit Tyro.

Why would Omega want to kill a lowly Senate aide? It didn't make sense.

He might never know the answer.

Obi-Wan looked around at the tiny office. He had arranged for Tyro's files to be moved to the Temple, where a team under the supervision of Madame Jocasta Nu would go over everything. There could have been something Obi-Wan missed.

By tonight, the office would be cleared. Knowing the demand for Senate space, by tomorrow, the office would already be occupied. Any memory of Tyro would be swept out with the dust.

Reluctant to leave, Obi-Wan lingered. He heard soft footsteps outside in the hallway, and Astri appeared in the doorway.

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"They said I could find you here," she said. "I'm sorry about your friend."

Obi-Wan nodded his thanks. "And how are you?"

"I am good," she said softly. "So are Lune and Didi. Thanks to you. Bog has been stripped of power, and he is now useless to the Commerce Guild and Sano Sauro. That means he is powerless to hurt us, too."

"So what will you do?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure. Didi wants to return to Coruscant, but I don't know." She hugged herself and shivered. "It has changed. I don't like it here anymore. I'm fearful here, but I don't know of what."

"I know what you mean," Obi-Wan murmured. He rose and came toward her. He raised a hand and switched off the lights in Tyro's office, feeling something break inside him as he did so. Tyro was gone forever.

They walked down the hallway together.

"My advice," Obi-Wan said, "is to pick a pleasant world with a genuinely democratic government. Raise your son." He smiled. "Keep Didi out of trouble. And always remember I am here for you," Obi-Wan said.

"As you have proven time and time again," Astri said.

She stopped and put two hands on his shoulders. Her dark eyes searched his.

"I see the sorrow in you," she said. "I can't take it away. But you have saved me and those that I love. Know that, at least."

The small moments, Obi-Wan thought, as he laid a hand over Astri's. They did not measure up against the times of sorrow. But they had to be enough.

Anakin sat with Palpatine inside the Chancellor's office. They looked out together at the temporary garden planted in an exterior courtyard of the Senate complex. Below, Anakin saw the tops of trees, delicate green leaves against silver bark. Running in

STAR WARS: The False Peace

a square outside the trees was the colorful splash of exotic flowers. Towering above the flowers were twin horns of the bloodred *claing* bush, native to Sano Sauro's world.

"I don't understand," he said to Palpatine. "You gave Senator Sauro the position of Deputy Chancellor. We are certain that he was in on the plot to assassinate you."

"I offered it before the vote on the Jedi petition, knowing he could not refuse," Palpatine said. "I knew he would betray Bog. The assurance of a powerful office would be enough to abandon a risky scheme."

"But you rewarded Sauro for betraying you."

"I have made my enemy my friend," Palpatine said. "His fate is now linked with mine. And I will always know what he's up to."

Anakin nodded. He would miss these talks with Palpatine. He felt that he was learning, even though he had not yet been able to sift through the nuggets of wisdom.

"I have asked you here to thank you for your efforts on that day," Palpatine said. "The Senate came close to being destroyed. Please do not fault me for saying this, but I feel that your Jedi Council did not fully appreciate what you did that day. I watched you. I saw how many you saved. I understand that Ferus Olin was given a special commendation for what he did. I don't understand."

"You don't? He saved your life."

Palpatine stared out at the vast Coruscant cityscape. "Good of him, of course. But no more than he was asked to do. Whereas you, Anakin, always do more. I just think it's a pity that the Council doesn't see that. Perhaps I should talk to Master Yoda—"

"No," Anakin said quickly. "He would think I wanted you to speak to him about me, that I was seeking approval. Jedi do not seek approval."

"Then tell me, Anakin. From the point of view of a Jedi, since it is sometimes difficult for those of us outside your order to

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understand it. Why did Ferus Olin receive special notice, and you did not?"

"Because he did his duty," Anakin said. He tasted bitterness in his mouth. "He obeyed his Master and stayed at his post. He saved your life and dozens of other lives."

"You saved more."

"It was not a contest."

"No. It was a battle." Chancellor Palpatine sighed. He looked back at the garden.

Through the transparent screen that separated them, Anakin saw Obi-Wan enter Palpatine's office. His Master saw them outside. He waited, not wanting to interrupt.

"I see your Master has arrived to fetch you," Palpatine said, rising. "I want you to feel free to visit me from time to time, Anakin. I know you have other missions. And I know you will perform splendidly. I for one am glad you are on my side."

"I am honored," Anakin said. He bowed his goodbye.

"Granta Omega," Obi-Wan said once Anakin had joined him in the hall. "We don't know where he is. But we know where he's been."

Anakin looked back at Palpatine. Studying the Senate had not been as bad as he'd thought. He'd been close to great power, the greatest in the galaxy, and he felt he was just on the verge of learning more about it.

But he felt he was not meant for power struggles and intrigue—not yet. He did not like to think about why the Jedi Council was so hard on him, about why Ferus earned recognition from the Council when he did not.

He did not want these feelings. He wanted them to fall away and leave him with his core, a core that was not threatened by what other beings thought or said. On a mission, everything else did fall away. He was able to concentrate, to focus.

He turned back to his Master. He was ready to go.

Book Ten

The Final Showdown

STAR
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JEDI QUEST

BY JUDE WATSON

THE FINAL SHOWDOWN



Chapter One

“Power cell?”

“Check.”

“Reserve?”

“Check.”

“Blade crystals?”

A glowing shaft buzzed to life.

“All check,” Tru Veld said. He turned his lightsaber around, looking at the flame-colored ray. It gave his silvery skin a rosy tint.

“I adjusted the flux aperture for you and rebalanced the handle,” Anakin Skywalker told him.

“Feels great.” Tru deactivated the lightsaber and tucked it into his belt. “Thanks. I may have built this lightsaber, but you sure keep it humming.” Tru looked down at his utility belt. “Liquid cable—check. Comlink—check. Aquata breather—check. And...” Tru reached into a small slit in his belt and withdrew a small bag. He swung it in the air. “Mmmm...some Terratta to eat on the ride.”

“Check.” Anakin caught the snack Tru tossed to him and popped it in his mouth. “Obviously, you’ve thought of everything.”

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The two teenage Padawans eased down on the floor and passed the food back and forth. They had checked each piece of equipment five times now. They knew everything was functional, but they kept on checking. Routine kept their nerves steady.

Many Jedi now had to be ready to leave at a moment's notice. Throughout the Temple, Jedi Knights were finishing up last-minute assignments and gathering their gear for new ones. Apprentices said good-bye to friends and fellow learners. Information was uploaded onto datascreens. Starfighters and cruisers were standing by, ready and fueled.

Just days before, there had been an attack on the Senate. Twenty-one Senators had been killed, along with twenty-four aides and guards. The numbers would have been higher if the Jedi had not been alerted. Even Supreme Chancellor Palpatine had been in danger. His life had been saved by Ferus Olin, Tru and Anakin's fellow apprentice.

The attacks had been carried out by Granta Omega and Jenna Zan Arbor, notorious galactic criminals. Yet the Jedi Council believed that a Sith was the real power behind the terrible plan and the Senate feared that this first attack was only the beginning of a much wider plot. They did not want to simply wait for the next attack. The idea was to spread a wide net, check out old sources of information, and develop new ones to lure in and trap the criminals.

Chancellor Palpatine urged restraint. Galactic politics were volatile, and he needed a period of calm to steady the mood of the Senate, which had grown ugly since the attack. He cautioned the Jedi to be discreet.

Whatever the next step, Anakin felt confident that he would be involved. His Master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, had been the first Jedi to warn the Council about Granta Omega's plans. His Master knew the evil villain better than anyone, and he would be on the team sent to bring Omega to justice. Tru was hoping that he and his Master, Ry-Gaul, would be sent as well.

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

Suddenly a head peeked around the corner of Anakin's quarters. "Terratta strips? And nobody invited me?" Darra Thel-Tanis held out a hand and the bag sailed into it, with the help of the Force.

"Show off," Tru said, grinning.

Darra slid down onto the floor next to her friends. She chewed on the candy with vigorous appreciation. Darra did everything with gusto. She had always been a vivid presence among the apprentices, with the bright bits of fabric she weaved through her auburn Padawan braid and her wisecracking manner.

But Anakin could feel a new maturity in her, a hardened sense of purpose. Ever since she'd been wounded on Haariden, she seemed to carry a sense of gravity along with her humor. She'd told Anakin that the incident had brought death so close that she'd made friends with it. The remark had been a joke, but a joke that vibrated with a seriousness Anakin had trouble accepting. He sometimes wanted the old Darra back, whose jokes were simply jokes, not keys to her own sorrows.

"Something's up," Darra said. "Your Masters are both in the Council room."

This was news to Anakin and Tru. They exchanged a glance.

"Soara is in there, too," Darra continued, speaking of her own Master. "I have a feeling we'll be leaving the Temple before the day is out." She stretched out her legs. "I'm ready."

"Was Siri Tachi there?" Tru asked.

"I saw her go in with Ferus," Darra said, nodding.

"With Ferus?" Anakin asked. A jolt of jealousy made him straighten. "Why is Ferus there when we're not?"

Darra shrugged. "They asked for him. Rumors are going around—something about the apprentices. I don't know what."

"But why is Ferus there?" Anakin asked again.

Darra shot him a curious look. "Do I look like a Council member? Moons and stars, I hope I'm not that grim. You're just going to have to wait and find out."

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"I don't think it will be long," Tru said, trying to reassure Anakin. Tru was Anakin's best friend, and he knew that Anakin and Ferus had clashed in the past. Although they got along better now, there was still a rivalry between them.

Just then, all three of their comlinks buzzed at the same time.

Darra consulted her message. "Well, whatever it is, we're about to find out."

Anakin was used to standing in the Council room by now. He wasn't nervous, the way he'd been as a ten-year-old refugee from Tatooine. He was almost nineteen now, close to being a Jedi Knight. Yet still, this time something was different. He felt a heavy presence in the room. The Council members sat in their various chairs, waiting for the three Padawans to step forward next to their Masters. Usually Anakin could count on a nod or a smile from a Council member or two, but today everyone looked, as Darra had said, grim. He felt the Force in the room, humming underneath and through them. He imagined that this concentration of energy was similar to what a war council might feel like.

Ferus stood to one side, next to Siri. He did not look at Anakin, or at the other Padawans. Something trickled down Anakin's neck, a foreboding he didn't want to name. Suddenly he had a feeling that he wasn't going to like what he was about to hear.

"And now, to begin," Mace Windu said, once the Padawans had taken their places. "First, the Council wishes to apologize to Master Kenobi, who has warned us many times of the danger of Granta Omega. We did not take the warnings as seriously as they were given. You were right, Obi-Wan. Omega should have been our first priority. He is now."

Obi-Wan nodded.

"You will be the first Jedi coalition to go after him," Mace said, looking at each of the Masters and Padawans in turn. "You

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

may contact the Temple at any time to ask for any degree of help or any number of Jedi to join you. We leave these decisions to you. The Council feels that there is Sith involvement, but to what degree we do not know. Therefore we urge each of you to weigh every move you make with care.”

Mace steepled his fingers together. “We have located Granta Omega and Jenna Zan Arbor.”

Anakin saw his Master give a start.

“They are on Korriban.”

Anakin felt the dread in the room. He knew of Korriban only through legends. Thousands of years before, it had been the seat of Sith power. The tombs of the ancient Sith Lords were there, and it was still a source of the dark side of the Force. It was a place no Jedi wanted to go.

“Of course,” Obi-Wan said. “He has strived to be noticed by the Sith, and at last he has succeeded. Now he goes for his reward.”

“Whatever that may be,” Mace agreed. “Certainly protection is part of it.” Mace’s intense gaze moved from Tru to Darra until it came to rest on Anakin. “And now we come to a piece of news for the Padawans. Because of our concern for the state of the galaxy and evidence that the dark side of the Force is gathering, the Council has made a decision to speed up the process of apprentices becoming Jedi Knights.”

Anakin found it difficult to keep his face neutral as excitement surged through him. He knew what was coming. He was going to be allowed to undertake the trials!

He was ready. He was more than ready.

“This is a major decision, and so we have decided to proceed cautiously, with one test case,” Mace went on.

Anakin’s heart swelled. Of course it would be him. He was the Chosen One, the one with the greatest skills, the greatest Force connection.

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“After much discussion, and consultation with all Jedi Masters, the Council has chosen Ferus Olin as the first Padawan to undergo the trials. After this mission, he will begin the trials.”

For a moment, Anakin heard nothing, just a blank where his name should have been. The words *Ferus Olin* seemed to have no meaning, like they were part of a language he hadn’t learned. That was how unreal it felt.

He wanted to move, wanted to cry out. This couldn’t be true! It couldn’t be happening!

He glanced at his Master. Obi-Wan was looking at Yoda.

“We want to make it clear that our decision, while unanimous, doesn’t reflect on any Padawan’s fitness to be a Jedi Knight. We believe in each of you. Yet we had to choose someone, and this is a way to begin. You will each be ready in your own time.”

My time is now! Anakin wanted to shout. Disbelief and anger coursed through him.

Mace rose. “The ships are ready for your journey to Korriban. May the Force be with you.”

Anakin did not know how he was going to get out of the room without exploding. His emotions were too wild to control. It was only by hanging on to the habit of a life of discipline that he was able to turn and follow his Master out of the room. Ahead of him strode Ferus, the thick gold stripe in his hair catching the light of the glow rods overhead. First out of the Council room. First on the list.

Ferus.

Chapter Two

“Don’t say anything,” Obi-Wan said in a low tone. “Follow me.”

Anakin’s face was hot. He followed his Master through the hallway and onto the turbolift. He watched the levels count off as he slowed his breaths, fighting for control.

Obi-Wan led the way out of the turbolift and into the Room of the Thousand Fountains. Anakin knew his Master had chosen this site deliberately. The soft splash of the fountains were a calming aid to all Jedi. The room smelled of green growth, and the refracted light of the water gave the air a soft radiance.

None of this worked to calm him. He wanted to fight against it.

“How did it happen?” Anakin asked, as soon as he was sure they were alone. “How *could* it happen? I don’t understand!”

“Anakin, of course you’re disappointed,” Obi-Wan said. “It is natural to want to be first.”

“I *am* first!” Anakin exploded. “I was always first in my class. First in lightsaber training. First in the Force.”

Obi-Wan frowned. “There is no such thing. We don’t rank students at the Temple.”

“That is what is *said*,” Anakin answered. “But it’s not the reality, and you know it.”

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Obi-Wan took a breath. “How good you are is not the point.”
“What makes Ferus better?”

“That is not the point either. The fact is he is *ready*!” Obi-Wan’s voice was raised, and that didn’t happen very often. Anakin could see that he was pushing his Master to the limit.

But he couldn’t stop. Not on something that was this important to him. “I’m ready!” he insisted. “I’m just as ready as he is.”

“That is something you cannot know,” Obi-Wan said, shaking his head. “It is not for the Padawan to know. It is for the Master and the Council.”

Obi-Wan’s words stopped Anakin in his tracks. A sudden knowledge seared his brain.

“You *agreed* with them,” he said. “You voted for Ferus!”

“It was not a vote...” Obi-Wan began.

“You agreed—”

“It was a discussion,” Obi-Wan interrupted. “To which all Masters were invited.”

“You’re not answering me.”

Obi-Wan paused. “Yes. I agreed with the Council’s choice.”

Anakin felt as though he had received a sharp prod from an electrojabber.

“Anakin.” Obi-Wan made a move to put his hands on Anakin’s shoulders, but did not actually touch him, knowing somehow that Anakin would push him off. “This is not about your skills, your commitment, or your abilities. This is about whether you are *ready*. There is a difference.”

“You don’t think I’m ready.” Anakin could hear how wooden his voice sounded.

“I think Ferus is. That does not mean I think he will make a better Jedi. It only means that I think he is ready now.”

Ferus had manipulated them. Ferus had somehow made this happen. He had voiced his doubts about Anakin aloud, sometimes in front of his Master, and somehow he had corrupted their opinions of him. Anakin’s fury grew until it was

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

something wild, something he did not know if he could contain. He looked at his Master, and suddenly Obi-Wan was a stranger to him.

"I can feel your anger," Obi-Wan said. "Take care."

He did not want to take care. He wanted to punch something.

"Your focus on who gets to be Master first is only reinforcing the rightness of the Council's decision," Obi-Wan went on. "You're treating this like a contest. You are not emotionally ready to be a Jedi. Decisions like this must be accepted."

"You do not need to quote Jedi teachings," Anakin said through his teeth. "I know them well. Better even than Ferus, though that doesn't seem to make a difference."

Obi-Wan's face was tight. "You need a little time to compose yourself. We can discuss this further if you like. I'll leave you now."

Obi-Wan turned away. His shoulders were tense. He took a few steps, then relented. He turned back.

"I believe in you, Anakin," he said.

Anakin had turned, too, and now kept his back to his Master. He could not answer him. He could only think of Ferus. After a moment, he heard Obi-Wan leave the room.

Ferus had plotted. Ferus had beaten him. Ferus had won.

And now he had to work with him on this mission. He had to help Ferus achieve what he, Anakin, deserved. He imagined Ferus's smug face as he accepted the praise of the Council. As he took his place as a Jedi Knight. He imagined Ferus as a Knight and himself still a Padawan.

It can't happen that way.

Anakin took his anger and focused it. For a moment, the water from the many fountains around him hung suspended in the air. He used the Force to keep the water frozen in midair, just to prove he could do it. The silence filled his ears. Then he let it fall, all the fountains gushing, trickling, racing once again. The noise seemed enormous now, a torrent. As though he could hear every drop of water hit every pebble.

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Anakin felt a surge of power. This was only a part of what he was capable of. Soon they would all know it. He would show them that they had made a serious mistake. He should be the first apprentice to move up to Jedi Knight. He knew it. And soon everyone else would know it, too.

He would make them know it.

Chapter Three

The Jedi assembled in the vast hangar in front of the two Republic cruisers they would take to Korriban. They split up the teams, with Siri and Obi-Wan in one cruiser with their Padawans, Soara and Ry-Gaul and their Padawans in the other. That way, the two best pilots in the group—Anakin and Ry-Gaul—would be in different ships.

Obi-Wan wished it could be otherwise. He didn't think it wise to put Anakin and Ferus together in a small cruiser until Anakin had cooled down. He had no choice, however; every decision they made from now on could be a crucial one. They had to think every step through. It was entirely possible that they would be attacked on the journey. They couldn't take anything for granted anymore.

While Anakin and Ry-Gaul did a flight check on their vehicles, Obi-Wan studied his fellow Jedi. It had been six years since they had all been together on a mission. The past years had been long and hard, and they all looked more focused, more intent, than they had all those years before when they went to patrol the Galactic Games.

Obi-Wan knew that Tru and Ry-Gaul had been on a series of highly dangerous missions and that Soara and Darra were recently caught in the middle of a fierce interplanetary war. He

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saw the changes in all the Padawans, how their faces reflected the seriousness of their purpose and the things they had seen. He saw in them the same recognition that he had once faced, as he had come to the end of his years of apprenticeship. You started out as a Padawan thinking you would lead a life of service and adventure, and you pictured your successes to come, not your failures. Successes could be daydreamed about in a vague way, but failures were more particular. They couldn't be envisioned. With the years you accumulated not only satisfactions but also disappointments and heartbreaking losses. Imprinted in your memory were things you wished you had not seen. The Jedi path was more complicated than you'd ever dreamed as you polished your lightsaber hilt and yearned to be chosen.

Siri was leaner, if that was possible. Her edge was sharper. Obi-Wan saw less of her humor and more of her frustration.

Ry-Gaul's bleached gray eyes seemed even paler, as if his experiences had leached out the color. Now they were almost white. He spoke even less now. When Obi-Wan had asked him about it, Ry-Gaul had fixed his moon-colored eyes on him and said, "There is less to say."

Soara Antana, oddly, had grown softer, almost tender, with Darra. Darra herself seemed the same, though the exuberance that danced in her unusual, rust-colored eyes would sometimes shift to a shadowy sadness.

And what of himself? What did his fellow Jedi think of him? He caught sight of his bearded face in the reflection of the windscreen. He was not old. He was younger than Qui-Gon had been when he took him on as a Padawan. Yet he felt old. In his bones, he felt a strange weariness. It was the concentration of all the effort he placed in vigilance. In watching. Waiting for something he could not name.

They all felt it. A gathering of the dark side of the Force. They held out their hands, pushing against the darkness, the chaos. They were tired, and they had so much farther to go.

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

And now, Anakin. He had to count on Anakin's maturity, the integrity of his core. Anakin would forgive him for supporting Ferus. It had been difficult for Obi-Wan himself to admit that Ferus was the best candidate. Naturally he'd wanted Anakin to be chosen, but something had held him back. He couldn't have done it if he hadn't felt the times were too perilous for the Jedi to make a mistake.

In time, Anakin would find acceptance. Obi-Wan was confident this was so, because he knew Anakin so well. He knew that Anakin was struggling now, and he knew that he could not help him. He knew Anakin's better side would win.

To Obi-Wan's surprise, Yoda himself suddenly appeared, gliding in his repulsorlift chair from the turbolift. Obi-Wan walked forward quickly to greet him on the landing platform.

"Master Yoda, is something wrong?"

Yoda did not answer him. Instead, Obi-Wan watched as Yoda's gray-blue eyes moved from one Jedi to another in turn, lingering on the faces of the Padawans.

"Felt I did that look upon you all before you left I must," Yoda said. "And tell you..."

"Yes, Master?"

Another pause. Then Yoda leaned on his gimer stick and frowned. "Like Ry-Gaul, I have become. Nothing to say, I have." Now he gazed with great affection at Obi-Wan. "What I would say, know you do already."

And Obi-Wan did. A great dread lay inside Yoda. He needed to look at them in case they did not all come back. He needed to stand here and watch them go so they would know how deeply he felt for them. He wanted to see them off, see the last glint of sun on a wing as they flew.

Obi-Wan nodded.

"Checks completed," Anakin called, and Ry-Gaul gave a thumbs-up.

The Jedi turned to board.

Jude Watson

“May the Force be with you,” Yoda said. He lifted one three-fingered hand in good-bye.

Chapter Four

Obi-Wan sat in front of the nav computer. There was nothing to do; they had been in hyperspace for days now, and they were approaching Korriban within the Horuset system. He knew their position exactly, and how far they needed to go. Still he continued to check coordinates and try to foresee potential problems. It was what he'd always done, even as an apprentice. He found comfort in the routine of it.

The journey had passed without incident. Ferus had kept a delicate distance between himself and Anakin, delicate because he gave distance without seeming to. Obi-Wan appreciated this effort. Ferus had given Anakin space, and that was not easy on such a small cruiser.

Siri came up behind him. "If you check that space chart once more, you're going to burn out the screen."

Obi-Wan spun around in his chair. "It never hurts to triple check."

"It hurts *me*," Siri said. Her keen blue eyes glinted at him. "All that precision gives me the shivers."

Obi-Wan grinned, then pressed the button for holo-mode. The star chart hovered in the air. "There it is," he said, indicating Korriban. "So isolated that it makes up its own system."

Jude Watson

Marooned in space, as though the other planets have chosen to hide from it.”

Siri sat astride a chair, planting her hands on her knees. “Don’t be so poetic. It’s just a planet.”

“More than a planet,” Obi-Wan said, gazing at the chart. “A source of evil that still calls evil to come meet it.”

“I don’t believe that,” Siri said. “It’s just a place where some old Sith bones lie.”

“The Valley of the Dark Lords,” Obi-Wan said. They had heard of the valley from their earliest days as students at the Temple, had used tales of the valley to scare each other as younglings. “The dark side of the Force still lives in that valley. Korriban has never recovered from the Sith occupation. That was thousands of years ago, and yet the planet has never formed a government or attracted settlers. It’s not part of the galactic alliance. It has never joined the Senate.”

Siri rose to study the holo-chart more closely. “Even freighters won’t stop there,” she murmured. “And freighters stop everywhere.” As she moved to the opposite side of the chart, briefly, the image of Korriban was reflected on her face. She shuddered and moved away.

Siri sat back down opposite Obi-Wan. “The Commerce Guild has opened an office there,” she observed.

“They’re offering incentives to get corporations to open branches in the Dreshdae spaceport,” Obi-Wan said. “I’ve been studying the files. Of course it is a world with no taxes, and that’s a Commerce Guild issue, but it’s still strange.”

“They are just trying to gain influence on major corporations,” Siri said. “Keep them in their backyard so they can control them. It’s the same old dance.”

“But Korriban?” Obi-Wan mused. “There has to be a reason...the Sith might be behind it, even if the Commerce Guild doesn’t know it.”

Siri waved a hand. “Then they’ll get what they deserve.”

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

While they were talking, the Padawans slowly drifted closer to join the conversation.

“So who is living on Korriban?” Ferus now asked.

“Three types of beings,” Siri replied, checking them off on her fingers. “One, those who are forced to live there because of work. Two, those who have been stranded there. Three, those who choose to be there.”

“Those are the dangerous ones, no doubt,” Obi-Wan said.

“How are we going to find Omega?” Anakin asked. “Dreshdae isn’t large, but he and Zan Arbor will be in hiding. And Korriban is huge. They could be hiding out anywhere.”

“I don’t think he’s come to Korriban to hide,” Obi-Wan said. “He’s come for a reason. My guess is that he’s been invited. He’s succeeded in his goal—he’s attracted the notice of the Sith. He’s going there for his reward.”

“More wealth?” Siri asked. “He certainly doesn’t need it.”

“Maybe help with his next plan,” Ferus said. “He could need weapons, ships, droids...we don’t know.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “True.”

The instrument panel showed they were about to come out of hyperspace. It was time to enter the coordinates for landing at Dreshdae.

Obi-Wan drifted to the front of the cockpit and the others followed. They stood, looking out into dark space. There were few stars out here, and no planets. Korriban loomed in their vision, a large planet with blood-red clouds obscuring its surface.

“I’ve heard it called the cradle of darkness,” Obi-Wan said. He realized that he had lowered his voice.

He felt it now, the dark side of the Force emanating from the planet’s surface. Looking at the faces of the Jedi, he knew they felt it as well. It had a sick sweetness to it, something that seemed to pour through his veins, attracting and repelling him at once. It was the most complicated surge of the dark side he had ever felt.

He struggled to meet it, struggled to clear his mind.

Jude Watson

Warily, Obi-Wan moved forward and entered the coordinates into the nav computer. His fingers hesitated even as they entered the data. It was as though making the commitment to land was sealing their fate.

He stood and joined the other Jedi at the cockpit windscreen. They couldn't turn away. The ship flew into the atmosphere, straight through the blood-red clouds, and dread entered their hearts as the surface of the planet grew closer.

Chapter Five

He would have to wear a mask. A mask of friendship. Anakin had decided this before he'd left the Temple. Ferus could never know his true feelings. He would defeat him without Ferus ever knowing they were in competition.

That had been his plan, but it was hard to follow through when faced with Ferus himself. Anakin could feel his resentment leaking out like a gas. It was only a question of time before he exploded.

No. I will prove I am a better Jedi. I will not explode in anger.

They flew over the planet, over mountain ranges and desert and deep canyons.

"Where is the Valley of the Dark Lords?" Ferus asked.

"Invisible from the air," Obi-Wan told him. "The valley is narrow, a slit hidden in the mountains some distance from Dreshdae. Plus it is constantly under heavy cloud cover."

"There's the spaceport," Siri said, as it loomed closer.

Dreshdae had been built on a plateau in the middle of the largest mountain range on the planet. From the air, the Jedi could see a huddle of buildings cramped together with no effort at orderly design.

The landing platform was deserted except for a small number of cruisers behind an energy fence. There was no one to check

Jude Watson

them in and no one to care. The landing area itself had been recently refurbished, but it had been a hasty job and already the platform was pitted and scarred.

Soara, Darra, Ry-Gaul, and Tru came over to Anakin's ship once they had landed. The Masters huddled in the cockpit, going over some last-minute details. The Padawans stood on the ramp, looking out over the spaceport and preparing their equipment. Dreshdae looked as grim at ground level as it had from the air.

"Not exactly Belazura," Darra said as she stuffed her thermal cape into her survival pack.

"I've seen worse," Ferus said. "I hope."

Ferus might have meant the remark as a joke, but Anakin took it as a challenge. Ferus was showing off again.

"We all have," Anakin pointed out.

"I don't think so," Tru said. "I'd say we've finally made it to the worst the galaxy has to offer." He said this cheerfully as he wound one flexible arm around his back to fasten the strap on his survival pack. As a Teevan, Tru could bend his limbs backward and twist them in surprising angles. It was one of the things that made him such an excellent fighter.

"I don't think you'll be finding any Terratta strips here," Darra teased Tru. "I have a feeling we'll be living on food capsules. I wouldn't trust the food on this planet."

"I never get the good planets," Tru whined, making a comical face.

They were joking now, wanting to displace the odd tension they all felt.

"We've come a long way from the Galactic Games, that's for certain," Ferus said. "Remember how nervous we were on our early missions?"

"Sure," Tru said. "I still am." He looked out at Dreshdae, and the humor drained from his face. "Especially here."

"What about you, Ferus?" Anakin asked as he bent over to tighten a strap that didn't need tightening. "Nervous? Or is that not allowed for a Jedi Knight?"

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

"I'm not a Jedi Knight yet," Ferus answered.

"But you're closer than any of us," Anakin said, straightening. "Does that make you more nervous or less? I mean, let's face it, the Jedi Council's eyes are on you."

Ferus frowned as he picked up the taunt buried in Anakin's easy tone. "I'm not thinking about that. I'm thinking about the mission."

"We're all thinking about the mission, Anakin," Darra said.

"Of course, we all want to capture Omega," Tru added. His eyes told Anakin to back off.

"But Ferus wants to be the one to do it, I'll bet," Anakin said. "Once you start impressing the Jedi Council, you have to keep on doing it."

"It doesn't matter who does it," Ferus said. "It matters that it's done."

"Spoken like a true Jedi Knight," Anakin said.

Ferus's neck flushed red. "Just what are you trying to say?"

"Anakin—" Darra murmured warningly.

Anakin took a step closer to Ferus. He couldn't help himself. Despite his best intentions, the words spilled out in a torrent. "That you'll do whatever you can to succeed on this mission, but not because you want to catch Omega. You want to be a Knight."

"Anakin!" Tru exclaimed.

But Ferus and Anakin were past listening to their fellow Padawans. They were careful to pitch their voices low, however, to avoid attracting the attention of their Masters.

Ferus's dark eyes flashed with anger. "That's a serious charge, and an untrue one."

"I've got news for you," Anakin said. "You won't be the one to find Omega. I will. I'd bet on it." The remark seemed to burst out of him without his directing it.

Darra sucked in a breath through her teeth. Tru shook his head.

Ferus turned away. "I'm not going to bet on a mission."

Jude Watson

“Because you have too much riding on it? If you lose, you might lose the Council’s favor,” Anakin said. “No wonder you won’t take me up on it.”

Anakin had gotten to Ferus at last. He could see it. Suddenly Ferus spun around and came within centimeters of Anakin.

“Okay, sure, I’ll take the bet,” he said. “Whatever you say, Anakin. I wouldn’t want to stand in the way of you and your ego.”

“Ego? You’re the one who spends all his time showing off!”

But if Anakin was heat, Ferus was ice. He buckled his utility belt. “Someone has to teach you that you are not as powerful as you think you are.”

Anakin saw the Masters looking over. He bent over and pretended to tighten the same tight strap so that Obi-Wan could not read his face. He had to control himself. He had gone farther than he’d meant to, but he didn’t care. Now it was out in the open.

They followed their Masters out onto the main thoroughfare of Dreshdae, a narrow unpaved street. A light gray rain was falling, and it had an acid taste. Anakin felt foreboding settle on his shoulders.

Dreshdae was a hodgepodge, a drab spaceport that had grown and shrank without regard for utility or beauty. Until recently it had been a collection of temporary buildings made of plastoid blocks or cheaper metals that rusted with age. The Jedi could see these buildings in various states of disrepair. Sprung up around them was a collection of newer buildings, most of them clustered near the Commerce Guild’s Dreshdae Headquarters. The Guild had spared no expense, building a multistoried edifice with durasteel facing in a multicolored iridescence that was supposed to sparkle in sunlight but instead looked cheerless in the drip of rain.

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

Although Dreshdae tried to present itself as a typical new, brash city struggling to grow, the strain showed. There was no disguising what the spaceport had been and would slide back into again—a dark, dangerous, lawless place. Undercurrents of its evil past bubbled up through the cracks in the stone facings and the hastily erected walkways. Beings hurried through the streets as if anxious to find shelter. No one lingered in the cafés. Anakin didn't hear one snatch of conversation, or one burst of laughter.

“Our contact is a businessman named Teluron Thacker,” Obi-Wan said. “He’s done favors for the Jedi in the past, and he agreed to help us if he could. The meeting place isn’t far.”

Anakin felt a touch on his shoulder and turned. No one was behind him. Perhaps it had been a leaf brushing his shoulder—but he knew, of course, that there were no trees on Korriban.

Another touch—Anakin whipped around. He looked at Ferus, wondering if he was trying to play a trick on him, but Ferus was several meters back, talking to Soara.

He began to pick up a whisper. Then another. He couldn't make out the words, only the intent. Someone was baiting him, cajoling him, laughing at him...or was it his imagination? Was it just the wind whispering through the stones?

They crossed the street and he thought he saw a flash of something—blood coursing down a stone wall. When he blinked, it was gone.

“Master...”

“It is the dark side of the Force, Anakin,” Obi-Wan said. “I’m picking it up, too. Ignore it.”

But Anakin couldn't ignore it. There was something insistent about the voices. Something that urged him to answer. Although the feeling made him anxious, he also wanted to face it. He wanted to get to the root of this dark power...to match himself against it...to prove, once and for all, that he was as strong as it was.

Chapter Six

Obi-Wan stopped outside the small café. It fit the coordinates he was given, but still he hesitated. Was it even open? The café was small, dingy, and in serious disrepair. Half of the roof was caving in. It was a wonder anyone would go inside at all.

“What is it, Master?” Anakin asked.

“Teluron Thacker is a prosperous businessman,” Obi-Wan said. “Why would he frequent this kind of place?”

“You think it’s a trap?”

“I’m not getting a warning. But still...” Obi-Wan shook his head. The problem was the energy on this planet. Dark waves buffeted him from every side. It was like swimming in an evil sea. All that darkness made it hard to distinguish what was a true threat.

“It could just be a case of not wanting to be seen with us,” Siri pointed out. “One of us should go in first to check it out.”

“I’ll go.” Anakin and Ferus spoke the words together.

“I will.” The words came from Ry-Gaul. He strode forward, pushed open the rusty metal door, and disappeared inside. No doubt Ry-Gaul’s height and size would serve to deter anyone who wanted to challenge him.

The rest of them waited, every second wearing on their nerves. Finally Ry-Gaul emerged and said, “He’s there. All clear.”

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

They followed Ry-Gaul into the café. Apparently the sagging roof scared off customers, for only one man sat inside, at a table near the door. He hugged a mug with one hand and kept his eyes darting from the door to the roof, as if expecting it to crash down at any moment.

Teluron Thacker was a tall humanoid with pale skin and the soft look of a being used to spending time indoors, sitting down. He greeted the Jedi with a nervous nod and drew his red cape around his body.

“Thank you for seeing us,” Obi-Wan said.

“The Jedi helped my home world of Eeyyon,” Thacker said. “I pledged to help whenever I could.”

“How do you find yourself on Korriban?” Siri asked.

“Just lucky I guess,” Thacker groaned. “I angered my boss. Such a little thing, but she was so touchy. So I didn’t check references and the deal went bad. What’s a few million credits? The next thing I know, I get handed an assignment to open an office on Korriban.” Thacker shuddered. “I haven’t slept through the night since.”

Obi-Wan signaled to the bartender to bring a round of drinks. In such a place, it was better to place an order, even though he wouldn’t touch anything they were pouring. He waited until the bartender slammed down a pot of grog that slopped over the rim, then dropped a pile of not-too clean mugs onto the table.

Thacker leaned over and whispered. “I wouldn’t drink that if I were you.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Siri said. “What can you tell us about the two beings we’re pursuing?”

“Only that they are here,” Thacker said. “A human man and woman have been seen. They match the descriptions perfectly. I checked the one hotel and several guest houses, and they aren’t registered.”

“They wouldn’t use their real names,” Obi-Wan said. “Did you give descriptions?”

Jude Watson

“Well, I said a man and a woman, traveling together,” Thacker said.

“Did you try anything else? Is there a database for arrivals and departures?”

Thacker shook his head. “Nobody really keeps track.”

“Have you looked into whether any businesses here are a cover for Omega’s enterprises?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Well, no,” Thacker said. “Naturally I want to help the Jedi. But it is not wise to ask too many questions on Korriban.”

“Why?” This question came from Ry-Gaul, and it stopped Thacker in his tracks.

“Uh, because.” Thacker shrugged. “Because that’s what everyone says.”

Obi-Wan exchanged an exasperated glance with Siri. It was clear that Thacker wasn’t going to be much help. He was too intimidated by even the rumor of possible problems.

“I should warn you about something. You know that the Commerce Guild has its own army? Well, there’s a division here,” Thacker said. “They say it’s out of necessity, to protect the business workers from petty crime. But spider and surveillance droids are everywhere. If Omega and Zan Arbor have any contacts in the Commerce Guild, they could have access to all the surveillance information. Which means they could see everything.”

At last, a piece of information they could use. But what else could Thacker tell them? Obi-Wan didn’t want to leave the café without a solid lead. Then a thought occurred to him.

“Zan Arbor has expensive tastes,” he said. “She is most likely not too thrilled to be here. There doesn’t seem to be much luxury in Dreshdae.”

“It’s a stinking rot,” Thacker agreed.

“Yet there are business executives here, creatures used to having the best of everything,” Obi-Wan said. “There must be something for them. If you’re looking to buy special items, where would you go?”

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

“There’s a loose kind of black market,” Thacker told them. “Run by thieves, of course. Supplies are low, there are no stores, and it’s hard to even find essentials, like blankets or thermal capes, even though this dump of a rotting death-hole freezes your bones. They rob when they can—from the better buildings, the offices. No hotel room in the spaceport is safe. They’ve made some hits on ships coming in with supplies for the Commerce Guild executives.”

“So how do you get in touch with this black market?” Obi-Wan asked.

“It’s on the outskirts, in a plaza that’s in ruins—that is, if you can tell ruins from the rest of these crumbling, cracked-up excuses for buildings.” Thacker’s darting gaze flicked to the ceiling. “I can give you the coordinates. If you want something, go at dusk. Ask for Auben. She’s the best of a bad lot—she won’t cheat you and she knows everything that’s going on. I’ve bought a few things from her myself. But watch out for the army—the executives in the Commerce Guild are tired of buying back their own items. They want to smash the black market.”

The Jedi stood.

“One more thing,” Thacker said. “The army isn’t your only concern. Auben might be less than cooperative. She won’t trust you. And she’s heavily armed.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Obi-Wan assured him.

Chapter Seven

Dusk on Korriban lasted for hours, beginning in midafternoon as the weak sun slowly made its descent. The shadows cast by the buildings on Dreshdae seemed thick and full of menace. There had been an attempt to install glow lights on the streets, but they were staggered in odd patterns. As the Jedi walked toward the plaza, they moved from light to shadow. They knew it was dusk only because the light was failing. There was so much cloud cover that they could not see the sun. The clouds just deepened to a dark red.

"I have a suggestion, Master," Anakin said. "This Auben might feel less threatened if she's approached by one person. Especially someone young."

Obi-Wan nodded. "That's not a bad idea."

"We can't surround her, we'll spook her for sure," Siri said. "Why don't Anakin and Ferus go?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "You can say that you're brothers, and you've been stranded here. Sounds plausible."

Brothers! Anakin swallowed his groan. Being teamed with Ferus was bad enough.

They approached the plaza. It was surrounded by pillars that had once held up some sort of roof over the plaza. Part of the roof still hung over the space. Behind the pillars were the ruins of

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

a building. There were plenty of places to hide, which was no doubt why it was chosen as the spot to conduct illegal business.

“We’ll stay here,” Obi-Wan said, stopping a good distance away from the plaza. “Whatever you do, don’t reveal that you are Jedi. That’s information that can be sold. We know Omega is expecting us, but he doesn’t know when we’ll arrive.”

Anakin and Ferus took off for the marketplace in silence. The tension hadn’t lessened between them. Anakin had hoped to gain information about Omega before Ferus did. He wished he were meeting Auben alone. It wasn’t that he would jeopardize the mission in any way, but he wouldn’t mind being one half-step ahead.

They didn’t say a word as they walked. They didn’t make a plan. Anakin wanted to complete the assignment as quickly as possible and return to the others.

They cruised once around the plaza. They could see a few beings in the shadows. It wasn’t until they’d made one circuit of the area that they were approached.

A young woman dressed in a tight-fitting gray tunic and leggings came to them. She wore a leather headpiece that fitted snugly over her ears, and she carried an enormous satchel on her back without strain.

“Looking for something, friends?”

“Are you Auben?” Anakin asked.

Her eyes flicked over them. “Who wants to know?”

“Thacker sent us. He said you had things for sale.”

“I’ve got it or I can get it. What’s your need, friend?”

“Blankets and handwarmers,” Anakin said.

She dumped the satchel on the ground and held up two handwarmers. As she crouched, Anakin saw two blasters in her belt. “Let me see the credits first,” she said.

Anakin held out his hand. She took the credits from it, then tossed the handwarmers to Ferus. “No blankets today, but I’ve got a tip on some plush thermal capes. You can meet me here same time tomorrow and I’ll have them.”

Jude Watson

“How much?” Ferus asked.

Auben named the price. Ferus raised his eyebrows.

“I said they were plush. Top quality. I’ll have some other luxury stuff, too.” She shrugged. “If you don’t want them, someone else will.”

“You have a lot of customers?” Ferus’s gaze roamed the empty plaza, pretending skepticism.

“I’ve got the whole spaceport as customers, friend.” Auben shrugged the pack back onto her shoulders.

It was clear she was about to take off. Anakin spoke quickly. “Our parents marooned us here on Dreshdae. They said they’d be back, but it’s been a few weeks now, and we don’t know where—”

Auben’s face was expressionless. “I don’t need your story, just your credits.”

“We heard that a couple landed at the spaceport recently,” Anakin continued. “A human man and woman. Maybe you’ve seen them—”

Auben’s eyes grew hard. “I don’t discuss my customers.”

“But I just—”

“Ever.”

Anakin knew they were at a dead end.

“So you only find things, not beings?” Ferus asked. “Seems to me that there’s not much difference. You need the same skills. Contacts and discretion.”

She stopped in her tracks. “What do you mean?”

“It seems to me that for the right price, you could help us with more than handwarmers.”

Auben hesitated. She gave them an appraising look, as if wondering how much they could pay.

But before she could speak, a blast of artillery fire shattered a column behind her. The explosion of rocks sent her flying toward Anakin and Ferus. All three landed on the ground.

“Commerce Guild droids,” she panted. “Run!”

Chapter Eight

Auben took off. Anakin dashed after her. She had placed herself in an exposed position, her back to the blaster fire, thinking she could outrun it. She was wrong. Anakin had no choice. The Force slowed down time, and he could see the blaster bolts streaking toward her emanating from a phalanx of spider droids. He withdrew his lightsaber and leaped to deflect them.

He twisted in midair and landed on the top of a pillar, where he leaped again, this time next to Auben as he swept his lightsaber to deflect more fire.

“Who are you?” she yelled, but there was no time for Anakin to answer.

Ferus dashed forward, covering their retreat. Anakin hustled Auben into the shelter of the dark ruins. They paused a moment to catch their breath.

Auben looked at the lightsaber. “Where can I get one of those?”

Ferus ran in, already sheathing his lightsaber. “They have tracking droids. We’ve got to get out of here.”

“We don’t know which way,” Anakin said to Auben.

Jude Watson

She blew out a quick, exasperated breath, then nodded her head. “Okay, okay, seeing that you saved my life, I’ll save yours. Come on.”

She led the way through the ruins, twisting through narrow passageways and climbing through blasted-out holes. Anakin knew that the other Jedi were following them. He could feel them close.

The noise of the blaster fire faded, but Anakin knew the army hadn’t given up. He could feel their presence, too. They were heading toward the outskirts of the spaceport now.

Auben led Anakin and Ferus out of the ruins and into a series of narrow, twisting streets. The street dwindled into a lane. The small hovels and buildings were spaced farther and farther apart until they were alone in a rocky landscape. The lane turned into a narrow dirt path that twisted and turned sharply upward. Anakin guessed that they were climbing the lip of the plateau that cradled the spaceport. Sure enough, they soon scrambled over a last obstacle of huge boulders and reached it.

Anakin looked down. Below them an ancient structure rose out of the steep mountainside and spilled out into a narrow valley. The mountain made two-thirds of the structure impenetrable. The entrance was in ruins, blocked by huge toppled columns and blocks of crumbling stone.

Anakin felt the peculiar stomach-turning wrench he experienced when faced with the tremors of the dark side of the Force. He knew what this wreck of a building was.

The ancient Sith monastery spread out below him, deserted for centuries, and still a presence of evil. Here was where thousands of Sith had once trained—and thousands of hopefuls had once disappeared forever.

“Is that where we’re going?” Ferus asked.

“Creepy, huh? Don’t let it bother you,” Auben said. “Nobody lives there. Everyone’s afraid to go inside, except for me. We won’t be followed, that’s for sure.”

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

“What was it?” Ferus asked, even though Anakin knew he was perfectly aware of its history. Ferus was too good a student. He had read the same briefing material that Anakin had.

“Just an old monastery. They blasted out the side of the mountain to build it. Will you two hurry up?” Auben started down the steep path toward the monastery. It wound through the boulders and crags.

Something in Anakin suddenly revolted. He rarely felt fear, but he felt it now. A deep voice within him was warning him not to enter.

And yet another voice, deeper than fear, told him to go inside.

Chapter Nine

Obi-Wan lowered his electrobinoculars. “The Sith monastery,” he said. “Why is she going there?”

“She doesn’t want to be found,” Soara answered. “I’d guess very few go in there if they don’t have to.”

They stood on the lip of the plateau, looking down. Thousands of standard years ago, the original inhabitants of Korriban had all been killed after toiling for years to build the monastery. Nothing living thrived there now. Not a bush, not a blade of grass. If the ancient stones could speak, they would talk of blood and terror.

“It could be a trap,” Siri said.

“Every step we take on this planet could be leading us to a trap,” Obi-Wan said.

Siri gave a half-smile. “So let’s go.”

They climbed down the steep, rocky path. Through the electrobinoculars, Obi-Wan had seen Auben lead Anakin and Ferus into the monastery through a crevice in the stones. He led the team there. The rocks that made up the giant walls had shifted over the years. Some large slabs leaned against each other, while others had toppled and crumbled into boulders.

Darra and Tru slipped through the crevice easily. Siri, Soara, and Obi-Wan followed—Obi-Wan with a bit more difficulty. Ry-

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

Gaul had the worst time. He was tall and solidly built, and even the Force couldn't get him through the crack. "I'll find another way in," he said when it was clear he couldn't make it.

"I'll come with you, Master," Tru said, starting to slither out again.

"No. I'll catch up." Ry-Gaul disappeared.

Obi-Wan went a few steps ahead into the darkness. He felt the dread of the place. They were in a vast chamber, as big as the Great Hall of the Temple. Massive blocks of stone formed the floor. The last of the light came through the crevices in the walls like bony fingers.

They heard footsteps echoing as Auben led Anakin and Ferus farther into the ruins. The Jedi followed silently. The oppressiveness of the place where Sith had lived and trained was a burden they had to fight against. Obi-Wan heard voices, but he knew they were ancient ones. He thought he saw shadows move. When he turned a corner quickly, he saw a vision—a Sith student on his knees, begging...

He averted his eyes.

Siri's face was pale. Darra and Tru looked shaken. Soara moved closer to her apprentice, to give her support.

In the distance, Auben climbed through a ruined doorway. The Jedi moved to follow, keeping out of sight.

They stopped outside a small chamber. They could see through the half-ruined wall that this had once been a small enclosure, perhaps a reception room. Auben had turned it into a combination hideout and storage space. Along the walls were bins filled with what Obi-Wan had no doubt were stolen goods. There was a bedroll in the corner and a couple of durasteel boxes stacked to form a table. On it rested a glow lamp. Auben leaned over and switched it onto a low setting. Shadows sprang up, dark and ominous, as if the Sith hopefuls who had trained here had returned.

Jude Watson

Auben turned to face Anakin and Ferus, her hands on her hips. "So. Who are you really?" Her voice echoed against the walls.

"We told you," Anakin said. "We're stranded."

"I think you are Jedi," Auben said. "I've never seen a Jedi, but I've heard of them." She waited, but Ferus and Anakin did not speak. She shrugged. "Fine. Jedi credits are as good as anyone else's, I guess. If you wait a little while, the army will stop tracking and you can leave. They won't come inside the monastery."

"Do you live here alone?" Ferus asked.

Auben leaned toward the light as though it would give heat as well as illumination. "I live many places. But yes, I'm alone here. Sometimes I get spooked. I hear things...but it's just this old place."

"Maybe we should look around for you," Ferus said. "Make sure you're safe."

"I don't need any help," Auben said. "I have my friends to help me." She patted her belt, where her two blaster pistols were. "So, tell me. Are you really looking for a man and woman? And don't tell me they're your parents."

"Yes, we're looking for a couple," Ferus admitted.

"Do you think you can help us?" Anakin asked.

Auben crossed her arms. "If you're Jedi, you can make it worth my while, right? I hear the Jedi control a vast fortune."

"Who says that?" Ferus asked sharply.

She shrugged. "It's just what they say."

"Well, it's not true," Anakin said. "But we can make it worth your while, anyway. Do you know something?"

Auben was in the middle of her usual evasive shrug when an explosive blast rocked the walls. Sand spilled from the ceiling. Auben was almost knocked to the floor. Anakin and Ferus rose.

Behind the wall, Obi-Wan and the Jedi team ducked with the explosion, keeping their balance with difficulty.

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

Suddenly they heard the sound of pounding footsteps and the unmistakable *clack clack* of spider droids snapping into attack position.

Auben had been wrong. The Commerce Guild army had followed them.

Inside the chamber, Auben jumped up, blasters already gripped in her hands. “They’re coming through the main chamber. There’s only one other way out. Follow me.”

Obi-Wan waited until he saw Auben kick open a small opening in the wall. He leaned over to Tru and Darra. “Stay with Anakin and Ferus, whatever happens. We’ll take care of the droids and come find you.”

Darra and Tru nodded. Quickly, they slipped into the now empty chamber and followed the others.

Obi-Wan, Siri, and Soara charged back to the main chamber, prepared to meet an army.

Chapter Ten

Anakin wasn't about to let Auben out of his sight. He had a feeling she was the key to finding Granta Omega. She knew so much about Dreshdae, and there was something in her eyes when they told her they were looking for a couple. His instincts told him she knew something.

Unfortunately, Ferus felt it, too.

Anakin could feel Ferus behind him every step of the way. They were moving close together in the narrow passage, Ferus's breath on his neck.

As Auben pushed forward, he realized that they were now moving parallel to the great hall. Despite the thick blocks of stone, he could hear the clatter of droids and the steady, fast ping of blaster fire.

Auben moved more quickly as the noise of the blaster fire faded, no longer afraid of being detected. The passageway led downward in a gradual slope. The stones were damp and slippery.

"Where are we going?" Ferus asked.

"Just follow me," Auben snapped. "And hurry!"

The passageway made a sudden turn, and they came to a partially demolished wall. Auben stepped over the stones and jumped into a chamber a little larger than the one they left.

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

“There’s a whole system of passageways that were once hidden,” she explained. “I guess the big monks used to spy on the rest.”

That sounded like standard Sith procedure to Anakin. Trust was not part of Sith doctrine. It seemed to Anakin to be a bleak way to live.

Auben led them down a bigger hallway. They went steadily downward, deeper and deeper into the complex. The walls began to weep with moisture. Anakin guessed they were now in the part of the monastery buried in the mountain.

They went through so many twists and turns that Anakin wondered if they’d have to use tracking devices to get out again. Even with his Jedi memory skills, he was beginning to feel disoriented.

At last, Auben paused. “What I’m about to show you isn’t visible from above.” She pushed open a rotted door.

Anakin followed. An ancient ship stood in the middle of a large space. He had never seen anything like it. Crude and clunky, it must have been state-of-the-art at one time. The afterburner tanks were huge.

“This was probably from before the sublight engine was perfected,” Anakin said, half to himself. Under normal circumstances, he would love to investigate the ancient technology of the ship.

Around it, various decaying parts of what looked like droids were littered, models so old he couldn’t identify them. He saw sheets and shards of durasteel and other metals on the floor and realized they had once been servodrivers, valves, and pumps, the hoses long decayed.

“It’s a service bay,” he said. “We must be near a landing hangar.”

“You got it,” Auben said. “Look.”

She led them through the open arch, into the darkness. Anakin stepped out and released a breath. The hangar was so vast, it ended in darkness. Service bay after service bay ran down

Jude Watson

each side of the hangar, waiting to repair the ships that no longer arrived. Hulking wrecks of ships still littered the floor, bits of metal that had once been droids, decayed tanks. Huge statues of terrifying creatures from many worlds marched on either side down the hangar. The statues had crumbled and cracked over the years. Some were headless, and the huge heads had fallen and crumbled into blocks of stone.

There was a smell of rust and rot, and the air seemed full of something thick, something like memory. Here the Sith had sent off their attack ships. Here their blood lust had pooled into technology and aggression. Here they had thought themselves invincible. Here disaster had overtaken them, their vengeance ending in defeat as their greed tore their order apart.

"It's huge," Ferus said. He walked forward a few steps. "You could dispatch an army from here."

"Yeah, a lot of ships for a bunch of monks," Auben said.

"The Sith were more than monks," Anakin told her.

"So I've heard. The original evil guys, right?" Auben looked around. "Well, they're all dead now."

All except for one, Anakin thought. *Maybe two*. If Auben knew as much as they did about the Sith, she wouldn't be so casual.

"So where's the exit?" Ferus asked.

Auben waved vaguely toward the darkness. "The landing platform is completely blocked off. From what I can tell, it's buried behind the mountain again, probably blasted with artillery a couple of thousand years ago or so. But you can get out through one of the hangar bays. It's a tough climb down the mountain, but it's better than tangling with the army."

Anakin suddenly felt a surge, a feeling that seemed to rise up through the soles of his feet and blast out the ends of his hair. His stomach turned. His nerves screamed an alert. He could feel the dark side of the Force, lurking deeply in the vast hangar.

"Anakin," Ferus said softly.

"I know."

"Let's...go back. Quietly."

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

They backed up, stepping into the service bay again. The cool shadow calmed Anakin's tripping heart.

Auben looked at both of them. "What is it?"

"Something worse than the army," Anakin said. "And it's coming this way."

Chapter Eleven

Obi-Wan quickly assessed the attack. The first and second lines were made up of dwarf spider droids and homing spider droids, skittering toward the Jedi with laser tracking devices sending thin blue lines bisecting the space between them. Behind the droids were the army troops, locals dressed in full plastoid armor with battlefield helmets. The sophistication of the force was surprising. Obi-Wan wondered why the Commerce Guild needed such an awesome security operation.

The blaster fire from the spider droids was fast and accurate. They marched on spindly legs toward the Jedi. Obi-Wan and Siri moved forward, lightsabers moving like pinwheels of glowing light, cutting down the first droids who moved forward to engage them.

They had fought together so many times that they had learned how to merge their styles. Siri was the flash, Obi-Wan the strategist. He set her up, and she closed the deal. He maneuvered, she struck. They moved faster than the droids could track, and, with Soara entering from the other side, they mowed down the first two lines easily.

Soara was a renowned fighter, and Obi-Wan always appreciated a chance to watch her technique. She was a fluid force, moving like wind and water. Each stroke of her lightsaber

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

was calculated, yet there seemed to be no calculation in her style. There was only movement. She took out five droids with one steady arc, knocking off their heads and sending the metal clanging to the stone floor.

Smoke filled the air and drifted to the vast space above. Deflected blaster bolts shot back at the startled officers, who found it hard to hold their line. They soon realized that they were not dealing with straggly thieves with a few blasters in their belts. They grabbed blaster rifles off the holsters strapped to their backs and fired. Two dozen of them advanced, while the third wave of droids moved in. Obi-Wan began to break into a sweat. He did not see the possibility of defeat, but the last thing he needed was to get clipped by blaster fire and have to deal with a wound while chasing Omega.

Then, from behind the officers, Ry-Gaul appeared out of the shadows. His silver-gray lightsaber hummed as he held it straight for a moment in front of him, gauging what he was up against. He moved quickly for his size, rather like Qui-Gon had, his grace surprising while his great strength never flagged.

The officers who turned to engage him couldn't get away fast enough. The remaining squad took one look at three Jedi to the front and one to the rear and began to retreat, firing as they did so.

They let them go. The presence of Jedi on the planet couldn't stay a secret for very long. Jedi did not take a life if they didn't have to.

As soon as they were safe, Obi-Wan whipped out his comlink. He couldn't reach Anakin. Siri tried as well, then shook her head.

"Too much interference here," she said. "We'll have to find them."

Obi-Wan felt something then. A flicker that started on the edges of his consciousness and then grew, a dark shape inside him.

He spoke quietly despite the dread in his heart. "He's here."

The others turned to him. "Who?" Siri asked.

Jude Watson

“The Sith. He’s here, in the monastery. Somewhere.”

Then he saw the knowledge flash in Siri’s face, Soara’s posture, Ry-Gaul’s wintry eyes.

They looked at each other for a moment, deep worry now ticking inside them.

A Sith was here, and their Padawans were by themselves.

Chapter Twelve

Anakin heard the flurry. It was like a flock of birds. But instead of the whisper of feathers, he heard the mechanical clatter of metal on stone.

“Stay here,” Ferus ordered Auben. “And hide!” he yelled over his shoulder.

Together Ferus and Anakin moved to the front of the service bay. They peered out into the vast hangar. At first they could see nothing. They could hear only the menacing clatter.

Then out of the gloom rose the battle droids. Line after line. Maybe thirty...forty?

“Wait,” Ferus said. “Those aren’t ordinary battle droids.”

“They have reinforced armor,” Anakin said, swallowing. “And the control center is lower...you can’t cut off their heads.”

“Too many,” Ferus said. “We have to retreat.”

“We can take them,” Anakin insisted.

“Anakin, this is no time to play hero. The two of us can’t do it by ourselves.”

“That’s your trouble, Ferus,” Anakin said coolly. “You always look at the odds.”

He stepped out into the darkness of the hangar. He saw the infrared tracking devices on the droids move over the space. They would find him. He had seconds.

Jude Watson

Ferus moved out next to him. Of course if Anakin went out to meet the droids, Ferus would have to as well. He wouldn't leave him. Anakin knew that.

"We should attack from above. They won't be expecting that," he said.

"How—"

"Follow me."

Anakin gathered in the Force. He leaped onto the gigantic statue to his left, landing on its knee. He began to climb rapidly up, looking for handholds in the crumbling stone. He heard Ferus behind him.

He balanced on one shoulder of the huge statue, Ferus on another. They were high above the floor now, but even so, the ceiling of the hangar was lost in the darkness above them.

"Wait for the first wave, then drop," Anakin said. "We can use our liquid cable launchers. The statues can be cover and—"

"I get it," Ferus said.

They waited for the precise instant their attack would be most effective. It was seconds away when two dark shapes ran out from the hangar.

Darra and Tru.

"They think we're down there," Ferus said in horror.

Almost immediately, the droids locked onto Darra and Tru's positions.

Ferus and Anakin took off in midair, the liquid cables holding them secure. They bounced off the statue and then swung out over the first line of droids. Their lightsabers moved in slashing circles. Due to the unexpected angle of attack, the droids were unable to lock onto their position at first. Sweeping out over the line, they managed to take out a dozen droids between them. Racing forward, Darra and Tru engaged the rest.

The eerie space and the darkness, the glint of metal, the pull of battle. Anakin saw nothing, felt nothing, but what was before him. He wasn't a fool. He knew their chances of beating so many droids were slim to none. But he also knew that it was only in

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

gestures like this that a true Jedi would be revealed. He Force-pushed a droid and it slammed into another. He slashed them both into one smoking pile.

Compared to him, Ferus's hold on the Force was puny. Anakin reached out for it in the way he knew, reached for the Force in the stones and the dust and very air he breathed. The Force was part of him and around him. His vision was sharper now, his control perfect. He didn't count the droids he dismantled. He didn't hesitate or second-guess his choices. He just kept moving.

Even while he moved, he kept track of the Padawans behind him and next to him. In battle, his problems with Ferus went away. They were fellow Jedi, and they had to cover one another.

The droids split off in a different formation. Darra, who had swung wide to attack, was suddenly surrounded. She whirled in an arc, keeping most of them at bay. Tru, who was closest, Force-leaped to help her, his flexible arms reaching out to slash his way toward her. Darra buried her lightsaber in the lead droid's control panel and it wheeled crazily astray, spraying blaster fire in random, dizzying circles. The stray fire caught Tru in mid-leap. He was wounded and fell, his lightsaber clattering to the floor. A droid stepped on it and kept going.

Anakin started to rush to help, but out of the corner of his eye he saw a flicker of movement. Something sinuous, flowing. Not the movement of a droid.

A cape. A dark-robed figure was moving quickly, keeping in the shadows, heading into the shadowy end of the hangar.

Granta Omega.

Tru was down. Darra had leaped to protect him. Now Ferus was moving in that direction.

The situation was covered. And Omega was getting away, no doubt heading for the same exit that Auben had told them about. This was his chance, his only chance. With a last glance at his friend, Anakin ran off into the darkness.

Chapter Thirteen

Ry-Gaul led the way. “When I couldn’t get in, I followed the wall back into the mountain. There’s an old landing hangar. It’s enormous—maybe a hundred service bays on each side. I got in through one of the end bays. That’s where they are.”

“The Padawans won’t know it’s a Sith,” Soara said. “Until...”

They all finished the sentence in their minds.

Until it’s too late.

Ry-Gaul led them steadily downward. Obi-Wan could feel the mountain as if it were pressing on his back. The closer they got, the more dread he felt.

They were deep in the monastery now. Even though it was in ruins, Obi-Wan could see how different it was from the Jedi Temple. Although the Sith monastery had the same goals—study and training—it was clear that this had been a place ruled by fear. The Temple had grand rooms, but it also had quiet spaces, light-filled classrooms, gardens. The Jedi believed that beauty was a part of the Force, and encouraged it. The sound of water, the play of light, the grace of a curving stairway—the Temple had been planned as a place of comfort as well as rigor.

The lines of this place were harsh. The walls were high, but narrowed slightly as they rose, in order to create a sense of being trapped. Angles were slightly off in a way that Obi-Wan realized

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

was deliberate. The monastery was designed to intimidate, to keep beings off-balance. There were no openings to air or light. There was only cold gray stone, massive columns, hard floors. Amid the weeping stones, Obi-Wan could still feel the fear that had ruled there, the many beings who had come to learn evil, the ones who had come naively, hoping for some kind of enlightenment, and had been trapped by their own desires.

He shuddered. It was as though he could feel each wasted life. Each terrible death.

The rest of the Jedi were silent. He knew they felt it, too.

At last Ry-Gaul stepped through a doorway into what had once been a service bay. They saw Auben cowering behind the wreck of an ancient vehicle. Wordlessly, she pointed to the curved arch that led to the hangar.

It was the silence that frightened them. They rushed out into the hangar.

It was littered with the remains of droids—so many that Obi-Wan staggered. Had the Padawans destroyed them all?

They could see that the battle had just ended seconds before. Tru lay on the ground. Ferus leaned over him, tending a wound with bacta. Darra whirled around and saw them, her lightsaber still activated. She shut it down as Ry-Gaul moved toward his wounded Padawan with his usual efficient speed.

Fear welled up in Obi-Wan.

Where is Anakin?

Darra saw the question in his eyes. “He ran that way—I think he saw something.” She pointed to the darkness at the end of the vast hangar.

Obi-Wan started to run. He would have to rely on the Force to find Anakin. He opened himself up to it, hoping it would reveal to him what he needed to know. Was his Padawan wounded? Had the worst happened?

He had no doubt what Anakin was chasing. No matter what Anakin thought, he was not equipped to deal with a Sith.

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan ran into the darkness. He could not risk a light, not even his lightsaber. The darkness seemed to invade his lungs, making it hard for him to breathe. He scrambled over fallen blocks of stone, engine parts, the shreds of machines and the skeletons of vehicles. It was difficult to keep his footing but he made no sound.

He saw movement ahead and realized he had found Anakin. Relief flooded him, rendering him weak for a moment. He had been so afraid, and now he wondered momentarily at his fear. It seemed out of proportion to what he knew of Anakin's skills. All he knew was that he had an overwhelming need to protect his Padawan from the Sith, to stand between Anakin and the dark side. Natural, he supposed.

Anakin was moving quickly, hugging the wall of the hangar. His focus was so intent that he did not sense Obi-Wan behind him. Obi-Wan noted this with alarm. How many times had he warned Anakin to never focus on the goal ahead only, but to cast his attention like a net, as far around him as he could? He should have sensed his Master. Obi-Wan quickened his pace. He felt the dark side of the Force grow and gather, and he wanted to call out to Anakin, but didn't want to give away their positions.

He needn't have worried. Whoever the Sith was, he knew exactly where Anakin was, for, to Obi-Wan's horror, his apprentice was suddenly lifted like a doll and flung into the air. Anakin's body slammed into the wreck of a cruiser. He fell to the ground.

Obi-Wan raced forward, his lightsaber activated and ready for battle. He kept his focus wide, just as he had taught Anakin. He knew the Sith was aware that he was there, and no doubt was aware that he would rush to help his apprentice.

No attack came. Anakin was already recovering as Obi-Wan bent over him, quickly checking for breaks or contusions.

"I'm all right." Anakin grunted. "Just...embarrassed. I've never felt anything like that."

"Did you see him?"

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

“Only from behind. Tall. Dressed in a black-hooded cape that trailed all the way to the ground. I didn’t see his face. He didn’t even turn. I felt the Force come at me like an autoblaster cannon...” Anakin struggled to his feet. “It could be a Sith.”

“I know.”

Anakin started forward.

“Where are you going?” Obi-Wan asked.

When he turned, Obi-Wan could see Anakin’s face undergo a change. Every muscle tightened, and his eyes turned flinty.

“We have a chance to make a stand,” Anakin said.

“We need the others.”

“It will be too late.”

Obi-Wan hesitated only a fraction. Anakin was right. They had to try. He started forward, and together they moved farther into the darkness.

“Keep your focus loose,” Obi-Wan warned him in a low tone.

“He will come from anywhere when he comes.”

“This time I’ll be prepared.”

“Don’t be so confident,” Obi-Wan answered. “You probably won’t be.”

They were nearing the end of the hangar. He sensed it rather than saw it. The corroded vehicles were more numerous now, lined up like dark, giant phantoms.

Like phantoms...

Phantoms that move...

Obi-Wan wrenched his gaze away. He could have sworn the ancient ships were moving.

Then he knew.

“This way!” he yelled, as the first vehicle suddenly flipped over. It would have crushed them if Obi-Wan hadn’t dashed to the side with Anakin on his heels. He flattened himself against the wall as another vehicle moved, its jagged wing a lethal weapon, capable of slicing them to ribbons. A cruiser suddenly zoomed toward the wall, straight at them.

Jude Watson

“Drop!” Anakin and Obi-Wan hit the floor, hugging the stones as the cruiser passed over them and smashed into the wall.

Vehicle parts began to fall like rain. The crashes were deafening. They leaped, twisted, and dived to avoid them, using the Force to deflect them when they could. Finally they came to rest in the shadow of one of the giant statues. Obi-Wan leaned against a clawed foot and squinted into the darkness.

He could not see the Sith, but he felt the Sith’s amusement, his triumph.

The vehicles now smashed into one another, creating a solid mass of screaming metal, effectively blocking them from the front of the hangar.

Anakin ran to the mountain of metal and tried to climb over it. Obi-Wan felt the dark side rise in a crest and then fall, leaving a vacuum behind.

“It’s no use,” he told Anakin. “The Sith is gone.”

“Gone.” Anakin repeated the word dully.

“Don’t worry.” Obi-Wan sheathed his lightsaber. “I have no doubt that we’ll meet him again.”

Chapter Fourteen

Anakin immediately hurried to Tru's side while Obi-Wan went to confer with the Masters.

"You all right?"

Tru smiled wanly, but didn't look up. "Just a few bruises. Ferus fixed me up."

Ferus tucked the med kit back into his utility pouch. He didn't look at Anakin, either. Darra studied the hilt of her lightsaber.

"I saw someone trying to escape, so I had to go after him," Anakin said. "It turned out to be a Sith. Obi-Wan is sure of it."

"Well, that's not surprising," Darra said. "We're on Korriban, after all."

There was an unfamiliar hard note in Darra's voice, as if she resented Anakin.

"Our mission is to find Granta Omega," Anakin said. "You had things under control, so I went after him—or, who I thought was him."

"So you were sure we had everything under control?" Ferus straightened, wiping his hands on his tunic.

"That's what I said."

"Tru was wounded, I was helping him, and Darra had to face off against a dozen droids, but everything was under control?"

Jude Watson

“Obviously I made the right call,” Anakin said, gesturing at the fallen droids.

“And you were only thinking of the mission, of course,” Ferus said.

“Of course.” Anakin knew what Ferus was getting at. He felt his neck heat up, and he turned away before the flush could reach his cheeks and betray him. The truth was less certain than his words. He was thinking of the mission, but he was also thinking of himself. He had been in a position to capture Omega without help. He had left Ferus behind with a secret satisfaction. He had wanted to win.

He sneaked a look back at Tru. His friend looked strained and unhappy. Anakin resolved to talk to him as soon as he could do so privately. Tru’s friendship was very important to him. But Tru had to understand what was important to Anakin, too.

Anakin joined the Masters. Ry-Gaul and Soara were examining the battle droid wreckage.

“These are the super battle droids we’ve been hearing about,” Soara said. “A complete violation of Republic regulations.”

Obi-Wan looked grim. “We are lucky to all be standing. This could have been much worse. I think our next step is to trace the route of the Sith if we can. He most likely used the exit that you used to get inside, Ry-Gaul.”

Ry-Gaul nodded. “That’s why he blocked it.”

“There’s another possibility,” Siri said. “The landing pad could be functional.”

Anakin shook his head. “Auben said it’s buried.”

“So maybe it just looks buried,” Siri said.

“Let’s ask Auben,” Anakin said. “She can show it to us, at least.”

They walked inside the service bay. It was empty.

“She was hiding behind the old cruiser,” Soara said. “Where could she have gone?”

“I doubt she’d return to the monastery,” Ferus said. “She was afraid of the Commerce Guild army.”

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

“She must have sneaked behind us when we were tending to Ferus,” Siri said.

“Most likely heading for the other exit.” Ferus swallowed. “She went toward the Sith.”

The Jedi exchanged glances.

Without a word, they moved back to the dark front of the hangar. Using the Force, they searched each service bay as they ran, making sure Auben hadn’t hid there. Finally they ended at the pile of vehicles and debris the Sith had used to block his escape. Grimly, they set to work with their lightsabers and cleared a smoking hole through the pileup. One by one, they crawled through.

They walked into the last bay on the line. A new cruiser stood there, its ramp down.

“Did you see this when you came in?” Obi-Wan asked Ry-Gaul.

He shook his head. “It must have landed after I left.”

As they moved closer, they saw a body on the ramp. It was Auben.

She was dead.

Chapter Fifteen

Anakin rushed forward. He checked her vitals, even though he knew she was gone. “What happened?” he asked. “There’s not a mark on her.”

“Her heart just stopped beating,” Siri said. “It’s said that the Sith were capable of stopping a heart without even touching their victim.”

“The question is, what was she doing here?” Obi-Wan asked.

Ferus had climbed up the ramp into the cruiser. He poked his head out. “That’s easy to answer. Stealing.” He held out two thermal capes. “She told Anakin and me that she could get her hands on some luxury goods.”

“While you check out the ship, Darra and I will see if we can find the landing platform,” Soara said.

Obi-Wan ran up the ramp. Quickly, he moved through the ship, searching for clues. It was evident that the ship had been left bare of everything except essentials or items that couldn’t be traced. He quickly checked the nav computer. Even the archives were wiped.

“This is the Sith ship,” he said.

“Expensive tastes,” Ferus said, dropping the thermal capes with distaste.

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

"Auben must have found the ship sometime earlier," Obi-Wan guessed. "She wanted to nab some items on her way out."

"Never got the chance," Ferus said.

"Maybe," Obi-Wan murmured.

He started out of the cruiser. "Something I learned from Qui-Gon. When you catch a thief, he'll always pretend he was on his way *in*, not *out*."

Anakin followed closely on Obi-Wan's heels. Obi-Wan bent over Auben. Gently, he reached underneath her body and withdrew her hand. He uncurled her fist.

"We just got lucky," he said. "The Sith was in a hurry. He didn't check."

"What is it?" Anakin asked.

"A holo-recorder," Obi-Wan said, holding it up. "One of the micro versions. She'd get a good price for it on the black market. And there's a received message here in the archive."

He pressed a button, and a miniature image of Granta Omega appeared.

Omega bowed. "Greetings, Master. We are grateful that our failure to complete our mission at the Senate did not disappoint you. As you generously said, the intent to disrupt and demoralize was achieved. The Senate is more divided than ever. It gratifies us that you have decided to entrust us with your secret. We have received the coordinates for our meeting. At last you will reveal yourself to us. We will then truly be able to further your cause throughout the galaxy." Omega bowed again. "Until we meet, I, Granta Omega, and Jenna Zan Arbor, servants to no one in the galaxy, remain servants to the Sith."

The hologram fragmented into a shimmer.

"Whew," Anakin said. "What a toadying dungcreeper."

"So they came here to meet the Sith, just as you thought," Siri said. "He's going to reveal his identity to them."

"Which means if we can find out where the meeting is, we'll find out as well," Obi-Wan said.

Jude Watson

Siri pressed her lips together. “We have a whole planet to search.”

A faraway look was in Obi-Wan’s eyes. “No. There is only one possible place for them to meet,” he said softly.

Soara and Darra appeared. “We found the landing platform,” Soara said. “It’s still completely functional. We found new access controls hidden in the ruins. Works like a charm. There’s evidence of a recent takeoff. By the looks of the scorch marks, I’d say it was a small airspeeder.”

Obi-Wan looked back at Auben’s body sprawled on the ramp. He tried to reconstruct what had happened. “He’s been using this place as a hideout. He bumped into Auben—and he killed her. Then he left the cruiser and took the airspeeder. More maneuverable. Harder to track.” And the airspeeder, Obi-Wan thought, would get him where he needed to go.

Obi-Wan felt a tug, as though a string had been tied to his breastbone. He walked down the ramp, across the remains of the hangar, and stood out on the landing platform Soara and Darra had found.

The chill wind knifed through his clothes as he stood outside. He was deep in the mountain. He could see the valley far below, and a vast expanse of gray sky.

He felt Omega. For the first time, he felt his energy. Though he wasn’t a Sith, Omega had sought out the dark side of the Force. He had been unable to harness it for himself, but he had lived in it. Obi-Wan was tied to him, energy to energy. He could track him now without instruments. He didn’t need clues, or tips.

“Master?” Anakin drifted to his side. “What is it?”

“I know where Omega is,” Obi-Wan said. “He’s in the Valley of the Dark Lords. And the Sith has gone to meet him there. We can uncover them both.”

Chapter Sixteen

Obi-Wan contacted Jocasta Nu. They needed more information on the Valley of the Dark Lords. Superstition, legend, anything that could help give them an edge. The problem, of course, was that no one had dared to enter the valley for centuries. Or, at least, had lived to report on it.

Soara and Darra saw to Auben. They couldn't move her yet, so they wrapped her carefully in the thermal capes.

Anakin looked for Tru. He had disappeared, and so had Ferus. Feeling uneasy, Anakin headed off to see what they were up to. Would Ferus try to steal his best friend? He might fill Tru's mind with his version of why Anakin had left them to fight the droids alone. He would twist the facts to make Anakin look bad.

Tru and Ferus were sitting in one of the service bays, talking quietly. Ferus was busy working on Tru's lightsaber. Anakin paused in the shadows. Were they discussing him? He thought he heard his name. He concentrated fiercely.

"I noticed it," Ferus told Tru. "That droid must have pulverized your power circuit."

"It slips back into half-power without warning," Tru said in a worried voice.

Jude Watson

Tru's lightsaber must have been damaged in the battle. But why hadn't Tru told Ry-Gaul? An apprentice was obligated to tell his or her Master if a lightsaber was damaged.

As if Tru had overheard Anakin's question, he said, "I know I should have told Ry-Gaul. But he's so correct. He might leave me out of battle situations, or even send me back to the Temple."

"If your lightsaber is permanently damaged, Ry-Gaul would be right to do so," Ferus said.

Typical, Anakin thought. Ferus always had to inform you of rules you knew by heart already.

"After all," Ferus continued, "you don't want to meet a Sith without a lightsaber."

"No kidding," Tru said. "This mission is crucial. That's why I can't be sent back. I just thought if I could fix it without having to tell Ry-Gaul..." Tru wound one flexible arm around his back to hug his opposite elbow, a gesture Anakin knew well. It was something Tru did when he was especially nervous. "Look, I know I wouldn't be the first or second candidate to enter the acceleration program—you and Anakin will be the first. Maybe Darra would be third. But I don't want to be left behind."

Ferus frowned. "Tru, your advancement is not the reason we're here."

"That's not what I mean!" Tru said, upset. "I want to stand with my fellow Jedi because we all know that the darkness is growing. We need every Jedi. I want to be there."

"We all do," Ferus said. He bent over the lightsaber, fine-tuning it. Anakin couldn't see what he was doing, but he was itching to get his own hands on the lightsaber. He was sure he was a better technician than Ferus.

"All right, I fixed it." Ferus put the handle back together and handed the lightsaber back to Tru. "You shouldn't have any more problems. Your power cell is boosted."

Anakin started to step forward. If Ferus had worked on the power cell, that meant that Tru needed to check the flux aperture

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

again. Anakin had tweaked it before, but it might need an adjustment to compensate for the power boost. Anyway, it would be wise to double-check. Anakin had better tell him. But he stopped when he heard his name.

“Why didn’t you ask Anakin to fix it?” Ferus asked. “He’s better at this than I am.”

“He was busy with Obi-Wan,” Tru murmured.

Anakin realized that Tru had evaded the question. He could have asked him to help. He frowned as he watched the two Padawans, their heads close together.

Tru was drifting away from him. He could feel it.

Ferus stood. “I don’t see any reason to tell Ry-Gaul, now that it’s fixed. We’d better get back.”

Angrily, Anakin retreated back into the shadows, then turned and headed for the others. He felt betrayed. Tru had chosen Ferus to confide in. He was Tru’s best friend—he should have been the one to help him! Obviously, Tru was holding a grudge against him for not coming to his aid.

Well, if Tru didn’t want his help, he certainly wasn’t going to offer it. Most likely Ferus had done a perfect job. After all, he was almost a Jedi Knight.

What was strange, Anakin reflected, was that Ferus had agreed to keep Tru’s secret. He would have expected Ferus to tell Ry-Gaul about the damaged lightsaber, or at least encourage Tru to do so. Instead, he had fixed it himself. Technically, it was a breach of the rules, and Ferus never broke the rules.

Anakin smiled. So the perfect Padawan wasn’t so perfect after all.

He paused by the wreckage of the vehicles that the mysterious Sith had moved so easily. There was a disturbance in the air, as though the dark energy of the Force still pulsed around the wall of debris. As if the Sith had vanished, but left a pool of his darkness behind.

He felt something new inside him, but he couldn’t put a name to it. He looked out into the grayness of the valley, just visible

Jude Watson

past the dark outlines of his Master and the other Jedi as they conferred on the landing platform. He concentrated hard. What was he feeling?

A beating heart. A being out there—somewhere—reaching out to him? It wasn't a connection...it was a call. It was something he didn't want, but something that drew him, pulled him....

Granta Omega? Did he have the same connection as his Master did? He didn't think so. Not this time. It didn't feel right. It felt...bigger. Hidden.

The Sith.

Anakin faced out to the valley. He felt the cold wind blow against his face. The Sith was calling him.

Chapter Seventeen

Obi-Wan turned to the others. “We need to get to the cruisers. It’s too far to hike to the valley. We only have about an hour of dusk left. We don’t want to go in at night. Madame Nu gave me coordinates for the best approach.”

Obi-Wan saw both relief and trepidation on the faces of the other Padawans. They all wanted to go. They wanted it and feared it.

He saw no fear on his Padawan’s face, however. He wasn’t sure how Anakin was feeling. There was something going on...underneath. Korriban had unsettled them all, Obi-Wan knew.

Even the Masters were not eager to enter the valley. They knew they were heading into great trouble. They knew there would be difficulty. Traps. Attacks. Surprises. The dark side of the Force could snare them, confuse them. But they each felt strongly that this was their only chance. The hidden darkness every Jedi felt was here. They could find it and expose it. End it. Here. Now.

Back at the Dreshdae landing platform, they hurried to their cruisers. Anakin sprang into the cockpit. He entered the

Jude Watson

coordinates Obi-Wan had given him for the Valley of the Dark Lords. They would have to find it through instruments, since it would not be visible. Then they would survey the area before deciding on a landing point.

Anakin did a preflight check, working quickly but carefully. All the indicator lights turned green. It was a go.

Except...

He tapped on an indicator. The light had shone green immediately. It should have cycled from orange to yellow first. Just a small thing, an indicator for the portside fuel baffles. If the light was red it would indicate a clogged baffle. Even that wouldn't prevent takeoff. He could fly with a clogged fuel baffle.

But why hadn't the indicator cycled through the colors?

"Problem?" Obi-Wan looked at him.

Anakin turned in the seat. The toolkit was clamped to the bottom of the counter. One of the clamps hadn't engaged all the way. It would rattle during turbulence. He would have noticed it on the flight here.

Someone had been aboard.

Through the windscreen, in the ship next to him, Ry-Gaul gave him a thumbs up.

"No!" Anakin shouted. He jumped forward and hit the comm. "Don't start the engines!"

Ry-Gaul looked at him, puzzled, and nodded.

"Anakin, what?" Obi-Wan asked, frowning at the urgent tone in Anakin's voice.

"Not sure yet." Anakin quickly disengaged the hatch and climbed down into the engine. He only needed a few seconds before he saw it.

He vaulted out of the engine bloc. "We've got to get out. The other ship, too!"

Obi-Wan hit the comm. "Evacuate! Now!"

Anakin hit the ramp control at the same time. He, Ferus, Siri, and Obi-Wan charged down. They met Ry-Gaul, Tru, Darra, and Soara.

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

“Take cover!” Anakin shouted.

The Jedi raced to the opposite side of the landing platform and dived behind a cruiser as the two starships exploded in a fiery blast. They felt the heat on their faces. A wall of air hit them.

Slowly, Anakin rose. He regarded the skeletal frame of the starship with regret.

“That was one sweet cruiser,” he said.

“What happened?” Siri asked.

“I saw an indicator light malfunction. It didn’t cycle through.”

“Which one?” Ry-Gaul asked.

“Fuel baffles. Then I noticed that someone had used the stowed toolkit. When I looked at the engine, I saw that someone had rigged the main reactor to blow on ignition. Then I noticed a small timer. I figured that after the preflight check if takeoff didn’t take place, it would blow anyway.”

“Well done,” Ry-Gaul said.

“Very well done,” Soara seconded, gazing at the burning ships.

“We’re running out of time,” Obi-Wan said. He took out his comlink.

“What are you going to do?” Anakin asked.

“I’m afraid that Teluron Thacker is going to find his courage.”

“I doubt he’ll want to give us a hand,” Siri said.

“He doesn’t have to give us a hand,” Obi-Wan said. “Just a ship.”

Within minutes, Thacker pulled into the landing platform in a large airspeeder with a bright orange shell. He looked at the smoking hulks of the cruisers.

He shuddered. “I’m not going to ask.”

“Thanks for this,” Obi-Wan said as Thacker quickly hopped out of the vehicle.

Jude Watson

"It's the company airspeeder. For clients." Thacker looked worriedly at the smoking cruisers. "I'm not supposed to lend it out."

"We'll take good care of it," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin looked at the large speeder with disgust. "This will be like driving a gravsled." He knocked on the decorative fins on the outside. "A gooped-up gravsled, at that."

"It will fit all of us and it will get us there," Obi-Wan said. "Drive."

The Jedi climbed into the airspeeder. Thacker remained outside, watching them.

"At least it has a couple of sniper blasters," Anakin said approvingly as he surveyed the instrument panel. "They might come in handy."

"You've been a friend to the Jedi," Obi-Wan told Thacker. "We won't forget it."

Thacker swallowed. "I'm sorry."

"About what?" Obi-Wan said as Anakin powered up the engine.

"It isn't very fast, or agile..."

"It's all right."

"I'm sorry!" Thacker yelled as they took off.

"Jumpy fellow," Siri said, settling into her seat.

"Everyone's jumpy on Korriban," Darra said. "Can you blame them?"

Anakin guided the airspeeder high above Dreshdae. He entered the coordinates into the computer. "Estimated arrival in ten minutes," he said, pushing to the maximum speed.

Siri twisted around. "Hey, looks like security cruisers on our tail."

Suddenly, the comm unit crackled on the emergency channel.

"Attention, Koro-1 Deluxe Airspeeder. Land and show documentation. Stolen vehicle check. This is the Commerce Guild Army Patrol."

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

Obi-Wan pressed the transmission button. "Correction. Owner loaned the vehicle. Please check with owner Teluron Thacker."

"Negative. Owner Teluron Thacker reported vehicle stolen. Land or undergo firepower from laser cannon."

"Thacker betrayed us," Obi-Wan told the others. "That's why he was so jumpy. Somebody got to him."

"Someone he's more afraid of than the Jedi," Soara said. "Anakin, can you outfly those security vehicles?"

"Thirty seconds to land," the comm unit thundered.

"In this bucket?" Anakin gripped the controls. "If I have to."

"Then do it," Obi-Wan said.

"Hold on."

The words had barely left Anakin's lips when the Jedi were nearly plastered to the cockpit canopy as the ship went into a screeching dive. The army speeders struggled to keep up.

A blast from a laser cannon thundered by, shaking the ship. Anakin put the ship into a tight turn.

"Come on, come on," he muttered. "You can do it."

The second blast was closer.

"Use those sniper blasters," Obi-Wan directed. "If we give them some firepower they might back off. Just don't hit anything."

Anakin flipped on the sniper blaster controls. "They've been disabled."

Obi-Wan groaned. "Great."

"We've got to outrun them, then," Siri said.

"Head for the monastery," Ry-Gaul suggested. "The canyons will give you cover."

Anakin pushed the speeder into a climb that slammed them back into their seats. He tried a corkscrew turn, a movement that he could make with his eyes closed in a decent speeder. This one groaned with the effort. The controls shook in his hands as blaster bolts skittered across the hull.

Jude Watson

"This isn't going to work," he muttered. "Ry-Gaul, can you take over?"

Ry-Gaul quickly slid into the pilot seat and Anakin transferred the controls. He crawled past the others to the rear.

"What are you doing?" Obi-Wan asked.

"If I can reduce the air drag, it can go faster." He spoke to Soara, who sat near a small toolkit built into the cabin wall. "Hand me that fusioncutter, will you? It's going to get windy," Anakin warned, before flipping open the canopy.

The wind whipped through the cabin. Anakin used a servodriver to disengage the canopy completely. It flew off the airspeeder, smacking the first security speeder straight in its windscreen. The blow sent the cruiser careening downward to the planet's surface.

"That was lucky," Anakin muttered.

He crawled out on the airspeeder. Buffeted by air currents and hanging on for his life whenever Ry-Gaul swerved to avoid cannonfire, Anakin crawled to the port fins. Using the fusioncutter, he sliced through the fastenings and kicked off the decorative fins. Laser bolts made the hair on the back of his neck stand at attention as the charge shuddered through the air. Anakin held on with his knees as he made deep cuts in the bright plastoid shell and kicked it off into space.

He crawled back inside the speeder. "Better?" he asked Ry-Gaul.

"Better. I can get it up past maximum speed."

To Anakin's surprise, Ry-Gaul inclined his head toward the controls, even as he made a hard left and went into a dive. "Take over."

Feeling pleased, Anakin slipped back into the pilot seat. A Jedi Master had passed the controls to him! Ry-Gaul was renowned as a pilot, and he thought Anakin better able to handle the evasive flying. Take that, Ferus!

Anakin kept pushing the speed. Even when the mountains loomed ahead, he didn't slow down. The airspeeder screamed

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

down into the valley. He looped around a peak and dived into a canyon dotted with boulders. The three remaining army security speeders followed.

Anakin kept the craft close to the ground. This kind of flying came naturally to him. After all, he'd trained on Podracers.

He whipped through the canyon as if it were a racing course. He flew over boulders, squeezed through natural formations, sensing obstacles before they appeared. One speeder behind him clipped a wing and spun out of control.

"Another one down," Obi-Wan said. Anakin allowed himself a moment to look at his Master. He always enjoyed making Obi-Wan pale.

A tall formation grew out of the canyon floor. Anakin headed straight for it.

"Anakin, you're pushing it—"

"That's the idea."

"This speeder doesn't have that kind of maneuverability—"

"I guess we'll find out."

At the last possible second, Anakin wrenched the controls. Instead of turning, he went straight up. The bottom of the airspeeder skidded along the formation. The sound of screaming metal blocked out the sound of the engine. Smoke rose around them. Obi-Wan saw licks of flame on the airspeeder's body. He closed his eyes.

The security speeder behind them tried the same maneuver and crashed head-on into the rock. The second veered off, only to clip a wing. The wing dragged on the canyon floor, slowing the craft until it ground to a halt.

Anakin kept going straight up. When he was high above the surface, he straightened out the airspeeder. The fire on both wings died out in the rush of air.

Nobody said anything for a moment.

Then Obi-Wan cleared his throat.

"And now, for the hard part," he said.

Chapter Eighteen

They decided they could not risk flying over the valley. The Sith Lord had been a step ahead of them since they'd arrived on Korriban. He knew they were coming. They would just have to arrive in a way he didn't expect.

They would walk in.

Anakin landed the now-battered speeder on a rocky mountain ledge, squeezing it between the mountain wall and a sheer drop. The Valley of the Dark Lords was a short distance down the mountainside.

They descended the cliffside, hiking quickly but conserving their energy for what lay ahead. The mountains were steep and crowded together like spiteful beasts, with cliffs pressing in from both sides. Occasionally boulders would crash down without warning, sending them leaping for safety. The extended dusk was still holding, but the light was gradually fading. The coming darkness was faintly tinged with red.

When at last they saw the Valley of Dark Lords ahead in the distance, their steps slowed and then stopped. The wave that came at them made them pause. It fractured the Force they felt around them, tore at it. They had expected to feel more of the dark side, but they hadn't realized how concentrated it would be.

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

They knew the Sith tombs that inhabited the valley were designed to amplify dark energy. It was a physical presence that the Jedi could feel, pressing against their chests. It made them instinctively reach for their lightsaber hilts.

The wind picked up, grabbing at their cloaks with icy fingers. The red-tinged clouds collided, rolling across the sky with a new velocity. They were alone in the middle of a harsh landscape, and even the rocks had warned them to stay away. The sand seemed to suck at their footsteps and the wind was blowing them backward. The air tasted rank and spoiled.

Obi-Wan wanted to say something. There had to be a phrase to bolster them, to make them feel less marooned in this land of gloom and shadows.

It was Ry-Gaul who spoke.

“May the Force be with us.”

And, of course, it was this phrase that renewed them, the one they had spoken so many times—to each other, to their Padawans—the words that felt so comfortable in their mouths, the words that were more than words, that lived in their dreams.

They walked on.

They paused just outside the entrance to the valley. The cliffs were so close that they could not all stand in a row. Shelves of razor-sharp rock protruded from each cliff face in a staggered pattern, all the way to the top, so that a craft could not possibly maneuver to get inside. The rock shelves created deep shadows, gray shading into black.

Obi-Wan examined the sides of the entrance carefully. He could see no evidence of weapons or security measures. It seemed impossible to him that they could just walk in.

“There has to be a trap,” he said. “Madame Nu says that legend claims that the tombs were guarded by tuk’ata beasts. They were at the service of the Sith.”

“Tuk’ata?” Ferus asked.

“Gigantic creatures. Triple rows of teeth, six inch claws, and three horns,” Obi-Wan explained. “They can move on four legs

Jude Watson

or two, and have two winglike extensions—not functional wings, but poisonous stingers. Very fast.”

“Let’s see,” Darra said. “Stingers, claws, teeth, horns. My favorite kind of creature.”

“It’s a legend, remember?” Anakin said, trying to keep his voice light.

“I...don’t...think so,” Tru said, his eyes on the cliffs.

There, the shadows formed into beasts that slowly rose, stretching long necks and sniffing the air.

They were certainly tuk’ata, and they reared up—four, then six, then ten. Their cries seem to split the clouds open. Blood-tinged saliva dripped from their triple rows of teeth. With a flex of their powerful legs, they leaped down from ledge to ledge, and then made the final drop with ease, landing easily and rearing up once again on their hind legs in preparation to attack.

“Did I mention they can jump?” Obi-Wan asked.

The Jedi raised their lightsabers.

Chapter Nineteen

The vicious tuk'ata moved at lightning speed. They did not have an attack strategy. They didn't need one. They charged with flashing teeth and claws and whipping stingers.

Anakin jumped toward the lead tuk'ata. He wanted to be the first to bring one down. The beast whirled, its yellow eyes flat with menace. One massive claw swiped through the air. Anakin caught it with his lightsaber. The beast howled. He had only angered it.

He needed to hit a vulnerable spot. He saw Ferus and Siri attack a tuk'ata together, moving in rhythm. Perhaps he should have waited for his own Master, but with a quick look over his shoulder Anakin saw that Obi-Wan was occupied with two tuk'ata at once, while Ry-Gaul and Tru were racing to help.

The creature swiped at him again, and, anticipating the move, Anakin ducked and rolled, trying to strike up into the beast's chest, where he assumed a blow would kill it. To his surprise, the stinger landed on his arm. He had not expected that range of motion. Instantly, his arm was on fire, though the stinger had barely licked him. Anakin flipped his lightsaber to his other hand, cursing his luck.

The tuk'ata struck, no doubt following up on his advantage. While its prey was immobilized by the poison, the beast would

Jude Watson

finish him off. But Anakin was able to flip backward and strike, this time burying his lightsaber in the middle of the creature's head. He heard the sizzle and smelled the smoke. The yellow eyes rolled, and the creature fell dead.

Ry-Gaul and Tru had been outflanked by two tuk'ata. Obi-Wan had his hands full with one massive beast, bigger and fiercer than the rest. Anakin leaped on the back of the tuk'ata bearing down on his Master, hoping to distract it. The beast reared up, both stingers waving, while Anakin did a quick and elusive dance to avoid their sting.

Obi-Wan advanced, striking the tuk'ata with a series of hard blows. The creature staggered. Anakin was able to slash at the creature's neck before he was thrown off. The tuk'ata screamed, rearing, and Anakin and Obi-Wan leaped out of its way. It toppled and thrashed and then was still.

They were already moving, turning to charge one of the tuk'ata who was after Tru. With a roar, it turned on them instead, circling and striking, trying to get claws and teeth embedded into Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan used his liquid cable launcher and anchored it on the creature's horn. Using the cable, he swung up and out, his lightsaber a blur of motion as he attacked again and again. The creature howled, trying to claw Obi-Wan away. Anakin was able to deliver the death blow in the chest.

Obi-Wan swung off the creature and landed, his boots thudding on the dirt. The cries of the tuk'ata mingled with the buzz of lightsabers as the Jedi met their attacks with moves and counter-moves. The tide of the battle was turning. Five tuk'ata lay dead, and two were mortally wounded. Anakin and Obi-Wan were able to team up with Ry-Gaul and Tru first alternately feinting to confuse the creature, and then slicing it into several pieces. Soara and Darra, working together in their usual flawless teamwork, had somehow kept two tuk'ata at bay. Wounded, the two counterattacked, but Darra and Soara were too fast, too agile, and too strong.

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

At last all the tuk'ata lay dead or dying, their cries echoing off the stones of the mountain.

"So much for legends," Anakin said, sheathing his lightsaber.

Now they were able to simply walk through the narrow passage and enter the valley. But the dark side slammed into them, a body blow. For a moment, they paused to fight the feeling, pulling in the Force to cushion it.

The mausoleums marched down the valley. Hewed from slabs of the mountain, polished by slaves, and then battered by the elements over hundreds of years, they were still enormous, high and wide, with columns and turrets. Mammoth statues, similar to those in the landing hangar, posed like guards outside the tombs. On the cliff summits, ancient statues of horrible creatures perched, appearing ready to strike. It was a valley designed to strike fear into every heart.

"We'll have to search every tomb," Soara said.

"Oh, good," Darra breathed under her breath.

Obi-Wan glanced at Anakin. "You're hurt," he said, concerned.

"It's nothing."

"This is only the beginning of the battle, Anakin," Obi-Wan warned sternly. "Let me treat it."

Anakin bared his arm. Quickly, Obi-Wan administered bacta. The burning sensation lessened somewhat. Anakin felt the coolness of the medicine on his skin. Gratefully, he shrugged his arm back into his tunic. He thanked his Master with his gaze.

He heard something—whispering voices, just as he'd heard upon his arrival. He could see that the others heard them, too. Low, guttural, insistent. Yet what were they saying? It was impossible to tell. Something evil. Something he did not wish to hear.

"They are waking," Ry-Gaul said.

"They know we're here," Siri agreed.

The dead Sith Lords, slumbering inside the huge stone mausoleums, had felt the Jedi presence. The dark energy poured

Jude Watson

out of the tombs. Anakin could taste it all, anger and cruelty and pain.

“Let’s try the first tomb,” Obi-Wan said.

He’s not there! Anakin wanted to cry. But he didn’t know how he knew it. He couldn’t trust it. It could be the Sith, trying to confuse him.

Frustration coiled inside him. He hated this feeling. He wanted to be able to trust what he knew. And he wanted to know everything. That would be true power.

“Stay together,” Soara said.

The tomb was massive. Two stone creatures guarded it, teeth bared, claws in attack position. Now Anakin recognized them as tuk’ata. Obi-Wan pressed against the stone door, and it groaned as it opened. They walked inside, keeping close together, their lightsabers held in position, serving as illumination as well as defense.

The tombs ran along the wall, slabs of stone with life-sized carved stone figures resting on top representing the dead Sith Lords. The whispers in the air grew louder. Anakin felt them against his skin like little puffs of foul air.

Trespass don’t we power Sith darkness command merciless...

Anakin heard random words, hissed in hate. He called on the Force to help him turn the words into meaningless static.

The darkness was absolute. The glow of their lightsabers barely penetrated it. They walked another few steps.

Suddenly, Darra cried out. A human skeleton rose out of the dark corner and slammed into her, knocking her to the floor. The bones trapped her like a cage. She tried to slash at them with her lightsaber but couldn’t move her arm.

Soara’s lightsaber whipped through the air. In seconds, the bones were dust. She stepped forward to help Darra.

“Careful—” Obi-Wan began.

It was too late. An energy net fell from the ceiling, trapping Soara and Darra. At the same time, blasterfire pinged throughout

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

the tomb in a zigzag fashion. They couldn't tell where it was coming from.

Obi-Wan leaped to protect Soara and Darra. Tru and Ry-Gaul moved forward, trying to detect the source of the fire. Anakin followed while Ferus and Siri slashed at the energy net, trying to release them.

From the rear of the tomb, a fireball erupted. It rolled toward them, fast and deadly.

"We have to get out of here!" Obi-Wan shouted.

Soara began to kick free of the net, grabbing Darra's arm and hauling her out. The Jedi hurtled toward the door. It was sealed tight.

They were trapped.

Chapter Twenty

There was nowhere to go but up. The heat of the fireball singed them as they leaped. It hurtled under them and smashed against the door. The Jedi were able to hang in the air, using the Force, for the crucial seconds they needed. They watched in astonishment as the fire blasted through the closed door. Corrosive, annihilating, the fire ate through stone.

The Jedi landed on the still burning ashes and made it outside. The fire burned itself out until it was just a pile of ash on the floor.

“Are you all right?” Soara asked Darra.

Darra nodded, but she still looked shaky from the electrical pulses in the stun net.

Obi-Wan knew one thing. They could not search every tomb like this. They would lose their energy, lose their focus.

He faced the tombs. He reached out, feeling each dark place, sending his concentration to every corner.

He felt him again. Omega was close now to his goal. Obi-Wan smelled his triumph.

He turned. “There.” He pointed down the row. “Zan Arbor and Omega are in there. They’ve gone to meet the Sith.”

Singed by the fire, bloodied by the tuk’ata, they moved as one body toward the tomb Obi-Wan had indicated.

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

Anakin knew he was there. The Sith was somewhere in the vast tomb. He was waiting. He was watching. But Omega didn't interest him. The Jedi did.

When they entered, it seemed even darker than the first tomb had been. The air was close and smelled of decay. The tombs here were in worse shape, crumbling, some of them decayed so much that they could see the bodies inside wrapped in shrouds.

Obi-Wan held up his lightsaber. From its glow they could see pictographs on the walls, images scrawled in red that had faded. Images of deeds done by the Sith. Wars. Massacres. Anakin turned his face away.

Join us darkness conquer dominance glory...

Anakin saw one of the shrouds rise. The layers of gray, shredding rags fell away. He gasped in shock. It was his mother, Shmi.

"Annie," she called. "Annie."

"Mother." The word was wrenched out of his belly. How much had he longed to say that word again, to see her again? It was the Jedi who kept him from her, the Jedi who had taken him away....

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan's voice was sharp. "It's a vision. Nothing more."

Anakin swallowed. The shroud was back in the crypt. He gazed at the others, embarrassed. Ferus looked at him with pity. Pity! His hatred for Ferus flooded him again. He had embarrassed himself in front of Ferus!

The visions came to all of them then. Sith Lords rose and walked toward them, their mouths gaping, their hands grasping, and then disintegrated onto them with foul smells and tastes. The Jedi walked on, through the corpse visions, through the whispers, through the taunts.

You are blind and you are fools and you understand nothing...

The dark side of the Force was like a thick curtain Anakin couldn't draw aside. It got in his mouth and eyes and felt as though it could slow his hands, stop his legs. Still, he kept on

Jude Watson

walking, kept on moving. There was nothing else to be done. They had to get to the end of it.

The creatures carved from stone that sat on the ledges took flight in shimmering images of fire and destruction. Tru ducked as one of them flew directly in his face, but the creature became nothing but particles of dust. Anakin saw Tru grip his lightsaber more tightly.

Tru's lightsaber! He had forgotten to tell him to check the readout for the flux aperture! He had walked away, angry and hurt. Why hadn't he remembered?

Had he *wanted* to forget?

He couldn't do it now. If he did, the Masters would know that Tru's lightsaber had broken and he hadn't told Ry-Gaul. He would get himself and Tru in trouble. And Ferus probably had fixed it perfectly, the way he did everything else.

What you are and what you do mean nothing next to what we are and can do...

Thinking of Ferus made anger spurt through Anakin. It was something hard inside him. It filled him up. It felt natural, it felt right, to allow his anger to grow. Why had he tried to quell it? He had every right to feel it! Just feeling it now gave him strength.

Obi-Wan held up a hand. "Stop. Energy trap."

Anakin could see nothing. Everything was dark except for the light from Obi-Wan's lightsaber.

Obi-Wan spoke in a hushed tone. "Concentrations of dark power. They are capable of immobilizing a Jedi for a time."

"I don't see anything," Ferus said.

"Look away, then look back. Use the Force," Siri instructed.

Anakin looked away, then looked back. He caught the faintest shimmer of purple in the air. It appeared and disappeared. You could miss it if you blinked.

"I see it," Darra said.

"There will be more," Obi-Wan warned. "The Padawans must be very careful. You most likely won't be able to escape alone. Stay close to your Masters."

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

They moved forward, avoiding the trap.

The chuckle split the fetid air.

"I would expect no less of you, Obi-Wan." The voice came out of nowhere. Mocking, sure of himself.

Granta Omega.

Obi-Wan stopped.

Slowly, Omega walked out from behind a tomb, just meters ahead.

He tapped a finger on his utility belt. "Did you really think you could avoid a few traps and catch me?"

"Get back here, you fool," Zan Arbor hissed, appearing behind him out of the darkness. "Why must you always *talk* to him?" In her blue shimmersilk, she looked as well-kept as ever, her blond hair piled in a profusion of neat braids on her head.

"Because I'm enjoying myself," Omega said. His handsome face creased in a wide smile. He appeared utterly at home in the terrible tomb. "I have, let's see—one, two, four, *eight* Jedi, all sent to capture little old me!"

"Are you forgetting I'm here, too?" Zan Arbor snapped. "Typical. I was a Jedi enemy before you were born, Granta."

"My father was their enemy before me," Omega said.

Xanatos. Omega's father, the former Jedi who had tried to destroy Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan had told Anakin about him. His son maintained the same arrogance, the same cruelty, the same howling need to hurt the Jedi, to make them pay for everything they lacked themselves. Honor meant nothing to either Xanatos or Omega. Only power. Only revenge.

Zan Arbor waved a hand. "This isn't a contest. I'm going on. Sith or no Sith, I can't wait to get off this planet. Come along. He's waiting for us. Come *on*," she urged sharply. "He'll take care of the Jedi—he promised us that. He's about to give us everything we worked for. Resources. Secrets of the galaxy. Wealth. An army of our own, Granta!"

Jude Watson

But Omega didn't move. Here would come his downfall, Anakin thought suddenly. The reward he was about to receive meant nothing in the face of his personal revenge.

"I can take care of this," Omega said. "With his help."

"Can I remind you of something?" Zan Arbor exploded in exasperation. "*You are not a Sith!*"

"I have surprised you every step of the way, Obi-Wan," Omega said, ignoring her. "And I didn't even know the secrets of the dark side! Can you imagine what I'm capable of now, in this place, where the very walls are your enemy?"

Obi-Wan held his gaze. Anakin glanced at him. He saw that Obi-Wan had no desire to speak. In his gaze Anakin detected no anger, no response to Omega's taunts. There was simply the grim will to get this done. There was no way Omega was leaving this tomb unless Obi-Wan led him out.

"Don't want to talk to me, Obi-Wan? Giving me the silent treatment? You're spoiling my pleasure." Omega gave a theatrical sigh and raised his hand, revealing a KYD-21 blaster. Anakin recognized it. Fast, precise, compact.

"I must admit, it's inconvenient that the Jedi found me here. But in a way, it's such a delicious end. I'm invincible now, you see. I fight with the power of the Sith behind me. And that means I can watch you die, Obi-Wan. You and your apprentice. I can't wait. Do you want to follow me back there, or are you too afraid to finally meet your defeat?"

He had gotten no further than a flex of one finger muscle to fire before Obi-Wan exploded in movement. He raced toward Omega, his lightsaber held in a classic offensive maneuver.

The blaster bolts came fast and furious. Obi-Wan deflected each one, swinging his lightsaber in a wide arc.

A horrid stench suddenly rolled out from behind Omega. He smiled, as if he knew what was coming. No doubt he did.

Then the undead came. Korriban zombies, revived by the Sith to guard the tombs. Anakin had read about them, but never thought he'd see them; the Sith must have activated them to

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

defend Omega and the sacred Sith ground. The zombies were used to eating the flesh from the tombs; now they had living targets in mind. And they had blasters and detonators to make the kill. They came careening out of the darkness now, different species but all moving with the same odd, lurching gait...the air came alive with smoke and fire.

Recovering from a moment of shock, Anakin moved to flank Obi-Wan. The zombies had strength beyond the living. They were half-rotted, a horrifying sight. Anakin did not look at their dead gazes. He went after them ruthlessly, his lightsaber deflecting their fire while he cut them to ribbons.

They were an obstacle, nothing more. A sorcerer's trick from long ago. He would not let their gruesome appearance or their grasping bloodied hands deter him.

He had to be in on the capture of Omega. Working together, he and Obi-Wan deflected fire while they moved toward a steadily retreating Omega. Zan Arbor had disappeared. For Anakin, she had ceased to matter.

Then the darkness came alive with visions. The Sith Lords, mighty in their armor, terrifying in their decaying, bloodied faces. They rushed at the Jedi, only to disappear in a shower of splintered shadow. Anakin tried not to flinch, to keep his eyes on the blaster fire, but the confusion was everywhere.

The dark side of the Force was like a presence, interfering with concentration and sapping energy. The Jedi reached out to one another, calling on the Force to battle the dark side, the undead who kept on coming. Anakin saw Shmi rise and fall, rise and fall. He felt the familiar need, the familiar guilt. The feelings overwhelmed him and Obi-Wan had to leap in front of him to protect him from a detonator heading his way. Obi-Wan swiped it out of the air.

They didn't choose me, and yet I fight for them, Anakin thought in anger. They chose Ferus, and yet I must fight to protect him, protect them. My Master didn't protect me, why am I doing this?

A phantom Sith Lord smiled at him. Reached out a hand.

Jude Watson

“Anakin.” Obi-Wan’s voice was close. “Keep your focus.”

His focus. Yes. Of course the dark side would go after him, not just with phantom Sith, but phantoms in his brain. Thoughts that weren’t his. Anakin reached out to the Force to help him battle the voices. He felt his head clear.

Tru had leaped up on a tomb to fight two zombies. With his flexible arms and legs, he moved like a rolling wave. He took down three thermal detonators that were flying through the air. He swung his lightsaber in an arc. It flickered. Anakin watched in horror as it buzzed, the shaft flickering again and again. It was losing power!

Tru was in the middle of them. Obi-Wan hadn’t seen it. He had charged forward, the way to Omega now clear.

Everything in Anakin screamed to follow Obi-Wan, to be in on the capture of Omega. Except one thing.

Friendship.

But he had hesitated too long. As he watched, Ferus and Tru exchanged a glance. Simultaneously, Ferus and Tru flipped their lightsabers through the air. Tru caught Ferus’s, and Ferus caught Tru’s.

Re-energized, Tru went after the undead, hacking off limbs and disabling the living corpses. Ferus dropped to a backup position with the half-powered lightsaber.

But suddenly Omega appeared again. He had sneaked around the back of the tombs. Zan Arbor reappeared at his side. Anakin realized that they were trying to trick the Jedi. They had set up most of the firepower in the middle of the tomb. While the Jedi expected them to retreat to the rear, they were actually about to escape through the front door.

He saw it again, the flicker at the end of his vision, a cape furling as fast as a serpent’s strike. The Sith stood at the entrance to the tomb. Waiting. His face was hidden in the shadow of his hood.

Zan Arbor hurried toward him.

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

Anakin wrenched his attention back to Tru. Because Ferus was watching Tru's back, he was the only one in Omega's path. The Jedi Masters had all been at the fore of the fight. Ferus's lightsaber flickered in the dark.

Seeing that he was in trouble, Darra Force-leaped toward Ferus, her lightsaber held high, determined to save him.

Anakin saw the smile on Omega's face when he fired.

The bolts hit Darra straight in the chest. She fell, still keeping her body between Omega and Ferus.

Soara cried out. Anakin felt the moment spin out into impossible time, time that froze everything, even his heart.

He saw the blue shimmersilk move like a breeze as Zan Arbor took advantage of the distraction to dash for the entrance. Blue Force-lightning erupted in the darkness, a barrier shielding her from the others, giving her space to run.

He saw Tru's mouth open in a howl. He saw Ferus drop to his knees and crawl toward Darra, saw him take a blaster bolt in the shoulder and keep on going. He saw Siri leap forward to defend all of them, saw Soara fly through the air in a great Force-leap to be near her Padawan. Saw Darra's head turn toward him, her cheek against the dirt. Saw the cloudy film in Darra's eyes, the shock of catching the blow. He saw, as if it were a physical struggle, her gathering her courage to accept the blow.

He saw all this, and still he didn't move.

And then Omega moved, reversing course once again, quickly retreating away from the tomb.

Anguish on his face, Obi-Wan turned away from the Jedi and followed him.

Real time came rushing back, and there was not enough of it.

Anakin turned away from Darra and raced after his Master.

Chapter Twenty-One

The tomb narrowed at the rear. The stench almost made Anakin gag. It was as though everything foul was concentrated back here. He could barely make out Obi-Wan ahead, running, attacking the undead that guarded Omega, circling him constantly like a cloud of rotting flesh.

Anakin put on a burst of speed. His Master was battling with incredible speed and accuracy. Anakin could feel the Force like a great pulsing, speeding, enveloping wave that barreled Obi-Wan toward his opponent. Toward his destiny.

My destiny, Anakin thought. *Mine!*

He focused so much on his Master, on his need to catch him, that he blundered into an energy trap.

Anakin was caught. He couldn't move. Frustrated, enraged, he slashed at the invisible cage with his lightsaber. He could not free himself. He kicked. He hammered. Caught.

He had met a power greater than his. Impossible!

"Master!" he called, but Obi-Wan didn't hear him. The energy trap sucked his voice out of the air and imprisoned it.

I just need the Force. Obi-Wan said a Master can summon the Force and fight this. I am as good as a Master. I can do this.

Strange, though. He could reach out for the Force, but visions got in the way. And not visions from the dark side. Visions of

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

what had just happened. Tru's mouth, open in a howl of anguish and disbelief. Darra, falling, eyes wide with the shock.

Darra, her head turned toward him, her cheek in the dust of the tomb.

He had seen her like this before, when she'd been wounded on Haariden. He had felt her wounding then was his fault. Unsure of her abilities, sure of his own, he had leaped to protect her and crashed into her instead. He had thought himself the better fighter, and because of that, he had pushed her into blaster fire.

She had never held it against him.

He saw her face again, so pale. The bright ribbon she always wove through her braid, trailing in the dust of the tomb.

He knew she was badly wounded. He felt it choke him. He had not gone to help Ferus. Darra had. She was lying on the ground. He tried to put those facts together to have them make sense.

Tru's lightsaber had slipped to half-power.

Anakin had never offered to check the flux aperture, just in case. He had meant to.

What is happening to me? Anakin wondered. His mind felt suddenly clear, sharp. *Why didn't I help my friends? Have I changed? Am I changing? What am I becoming?*

When he had first become a Padawan, he would not have hesitated. His first loyalty had been to them.

Things were more complicated now. There was more at stake.

Maybe he was changing for the better.

Control rule supremacy greatness...

Was he more mature now? A better fighter? Better able to assess a situation, move toward the goal? Was that why he had raced to confront Omega? Or had his own jealousy propelled him? How could he separate those things? Why did he have to?

Power rules by results...

Anakin shook his head. The voices would not leave him.

Jude Watson

He thought of Darra. Tenderness filled him, and the voices went away.

Years ago, he had gone to see Darra in the med clinic, filled with remorse. She had shaken him out of his guilt with a grin. *Now I have something to impress the younglings with. I've been wounded in battle.*

And then he remembered something he hadn't thought of in years. He had always thought of her strength during that time. Now he remembered her fragility. He remembered her hand on the coverlet. Her fingers had so briefly touched his sleeve.

Stay with me until I fall asleep. It's lonely here.

Anakin beat at the trap again. He felt the rage rise inside him. He knew the rage was interfering with the Force, but he couldn't control it. If only...if only he could *use* the rage. But that was something a Jedi should not do.

The frustration boiled in him. He could not move. His Master was gone now, into the darkness.

Obi-Wan shouldn't have been surprised when the visions of the Sith Lords faded and he saw Qui-Gon. But he was. He should have known the Sith were capable of drawing his most painful memory from within him.

Qui-Gon, with a gaping wound in his chest where Darth Maul had struck.

"You were always so afraid of disappointing me," Qui-Gon said. "And you have."

Obi-Wan stopped. His lightsaber dangled in his hand.

It's not real. It's not real.

"You've failed me, Obi-Wan."

Not...real.

"And you don't even know why."

Obi-Wan took a breath. He walked forward, straight at Qui-Gon. The image disappeared.

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

Shaken, he continued into the darkness. Now it was easier to walk past the Sith Lords, the visions who snarled and hissed and sent out grasping fingers as he walked past. He had seen the worst.

He heard a hiss, felt the dark side surge, and barely had time to prepare when the flash lit up the darkness. A luma blast, sent by a rocket, designed to blind him.

Obi-Wan threw himself on the floor and rolled. Behind his closed eyes, he saw explosions of orange and yellow, bright as a double sun. Using the Force, he guided himself alongside a tomb and crouched behind it. When he opened his eyes, he could see nothing.

Then more blaster fire, so rapid he realized that Omega must have set up a repeating blaster. From the sound of it, an E-Web, one of the most powerful repeating blasters ever manufactured. It sat on a tripod. It took two gunners, but one could handle it, if very skilled.

Omega didn't know where he was...yet. Obi-Wan was painfully aware that the E-Web had enough power to punch through armor plating on a cruiser. He heard the stone tombs shatter across the space as they were hit. He couldn't remain here. He had to keep moving.

He kept himself low to the ground and felt his way around the tomb. He could track the blaster fire through the Force, could defend himself if he had to. It was part of Jedi training to be able to fight without sight. Younglings learned with novice helmets that blocked their vision. Obi-Wan was suddenly, fiercely glad for that training.

Omega would expect him to hide. Therefore, he had to expose himself. He had to trust in the Force.

Blinded, Obi-Wan rushed forward. He felt the air against him as a guide. Objects displaced air, and with the help of the Force, a Jedi could feel the displacement and adjust. Obi-Wan raced forward confidently. His vision would return. In the meantime,

Jude Watson

Omega was close. So close he could hear the creak of his armor-weave tunic as he moved his arm....

A wrist rocket. Obi-Wan dodged and weaved, knowing the targeting laser system was working to get a fix on him. He moved like quicksilver, flowing from one position to the next. He heard the rocket release and he put on a burst of speed, running blind, running straight at Omega now. He felt the whistle as the rocket whizzed by his ear.

"I love watching you run," Omega said. "Ready, set, go!"

Another wrist rocket. Obi-Wan Force-leaped. He felt the rocket behind him and he swerved at the last minute. The rocket crashed into a tomb. Splinters of rock showered over Obi-Wan.

"I could do this all day," Omega said.

Blinded, breathing hard, Obi-Wan allowed himself a fraction of a moment to rest. Inside him blazed the memory of every battle with Omega. From the beginning Omega had set out to confound him, humiliate him, destroy him. He had set out to impress the Sith by attacking the Jedi, and he had managed to do it again and again, always escaping at the last possible moment. He had even managed to kill a Jedi Master. Yaddle had sacrificed her life for this man's greed and revenge.

It had to end here. It had to end now.

He saw streaks in his vision now, a sign that his sight was returning. He just needed a few precious minutes.

"You mentioned having the help of the Sith, Omega," Obi-Wan said, raising his voice to carry without shouting. "How is that you've ended up alone back here?"

"I'm not alone," Omega said. "I have his help."

"Really? Can you feel him? I can't. And remember, I'm the one who can feel the Force. Not you."

"You arrogant fool," Omega snarled. "I am to be a Sith! He told me so."

"And you believed him." Obi-Wan was beginning to make out the shape of the tomb opposite him, fragments of shape

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

fracturing the orange streaks in his vision. "Flattery will get him everywhere, it seems."

"He wasn't flattering me! Right now I am a Sith without the Force. I can use *his* power." There was a note of defensiveness in Omega's voice.

"It seems to me that he gets to use you."

"He would not abandon me!"

The shapes took sharper form. His vision wasn't perfect, but it would have to do.

Obi-Wan stood. "You'd better hope so."

He could just barely make out Omega standing behind the E-Web. "Your arrogance will bring you down, Obi-Wan!"

"Funny. I was just about to say the same." Obi-Wan activated his lightsaber again. The blaster bolts were so powerful they sent shock waves down his arm as he deflected them. The fire was fast and furious. Where was Anakin? He could use his help. Or someone's...

He had to concentrate on the moment. Not on what he didn't have.

You have everything you need, my Padawan.

This time, Qui-Gon's voice was kind. The voice was inside him. It was true, it was real, and it gave him strength.

His lightsaber whirled, spinning in an arc to gather momentum with each strike against the bolts. He could hear Omega breathing heavily. Obi-Wan was sending bolts back to him at a steady pace, but Omega was managing to evade fire as he deployed the E-Web repeating blaster.

The orange streaks were fading now. Obi-Wan could clearly see the outlines of the last tombs. Omega was silhouetted against the blaster bolts that sent faint, electric illumination through the air. He was gripping the blaster on the tripod, intent now in the full fury of his lust to take Obi-Wan down.

Something Anakin had once said floated through his mind. Anakin knew more about machines than Obi-Wan ever wanted to know.

Jude Watson

Funny. No matter how advanced, a weapon always has a flaw. It can always turn against itself.

The flaw. What was the flaw?

The E-Web needed two operators because it was liable to overload if one operator didn't keep track of power flow. If overloaded, it wouldn't simply shut down—it would backblast.

Obi-Wan put on another burst of speed. He went after each blaster bolt with skilled parries. But instead of advancing he moved laterally. He only appeared to advance.

Out of rockets now, Omega tore off the wrist launchers. They were heavy, and he was getting tired. Sweat was pouring down his face. The E-Web was smoking now, and he didn't notice.

Obi-Wan's arms began to shake from the effort of deflecting the blaster bolts. He was tired. His vision was still faulty. With sudden clarity, he realized that he could lose this battle. He was calculating on the failure of a machine he wasn't terribly familiar with. He was counting on a bit of luck.

It took all of his concentration. One stumble could send him straight into a blaster bolt that would rip through him like pudding.

Through the smoke, across the haze, Omega's blue gaze was hot and burning. Hate blazed at Obi-Wan. Omega was screaming incoherently now, his voice barely heard over the sound of gunfire. The E-Web pounded and smoked.

Obi-Wan stumbled and hit his knees. Omega smiled. He leaned forward to aim.

The weapon gave in. It shuddered and stopped for one small instant. Omega shook it.

The blast was tremendous. A concentration of energy blew Omega back, his body dangling in the air, a shocked expression on his face. He slammed into the tomb wall. Broken. The shock on his face faded as his life drained from him.

"You..." It was all he managed to get out.

Obi-Wan heard pounding feet behind him. Anakin ran up and stopped. "Master—"

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

"It's all right. He's gone." Obi-Wan deactivated his lightsaber. "It's over."

"I was caught in an energy trap."

"You got out by yourself. That's good. Come, Padawan." Obi-Wan turned. "Let's see to the others. We—"

A gathering roar came from behind him. Omega threw himself forward, a blaster firing in his hand, his teeth bared. "You killed my father! You...will...not...win!"

Obi-Wan activated his lightsaber as he turned. The moment he had not wanted to come had arrived. No matter how much he had wished to stop Omega, he had never wished to kill him. He remembered how Xanatos's death had haunted Qui-Gon. He did not want the same fate.

But fate had taken away his choices.

His lightsaber rose, as if in slow motion. Yet it moved faster than an eyeblink. It came down and cleaved into Omega.

He fell to his knees.

Instead of retreating, Obi-Wan walked forward. He did not want to see Omega die, but no one should have to die alone.

Omega looked up into his face. His lips were drawn back over his teeth in a gruesome smile. A spasm of something crossed his features. What was it? Satisfaction, Obi-Wan realized. What did it mean?

"Do you think you won? You didn't," Omega said. Every word was an effort. "I know...who he is." He toppled over, curling up like a child. "You will wish...you did."

Still smiling, still holding his hatred and rage, Omega let go of his life at last and collapsed into the dust.

Something rushed out, as if a great power had removed its protection from Omega.

The visions of the Sith Lords faded. The dark side of the Force retreated. The Sith would not be found. Obi-Wan knew he had withdrawn both his presence and his protection.

Obi-Wan tucked his lightsaber back into his belt. "Let's see to Darra," he said.

Jude Watson

Soara cradled her in her arms. Tru had wrapped his cloak around her. Ferus sat on the ground, his head in his hands, and did not look up. Siri and Ry-Gaul stood on either side of the group, as if guarding them from harm. But harm had come and done its work.

Darra was dead.

Obi-Wan knelt in front of her. Her eyes were closed, her face composed and impossibly calm. Anakin watched as Soara very gently unraveled Darra's Padawan braid. She plucked the bright ribbon from the coils of soft hair and held it in her fist. Tears streaked down her face. Anakin could never have imagined seeing Soara Antana, fabled warrior, in tears.

Anakin heard Darra's voice rise like a cry inside him.

Stay with me until I fall asleep. It's lonely here.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Great Hall seemed more vast, the journey to the Council room longer than Obi-Wan ever remembered. His legs had never felt so heavy. He walked without seeing. He felt strangely numb. He had never felt so tired.

He knew about the rumors at the Temple. He knew that Tru's lightsaber had been faulty, that Ferus had fixed it secretly, that neither of them had told their Masters. He knew that Tru had been censured. Ferus was in seclusion but would be facing the Council directly after Obi-Wan.

He knew these things, and he knew that in the eyes of the Council, the mission had succeeded, in part. They had caught Granta Omega. Zan Arbor had escaped, but the Council felt she was easier to track. Without Omega's wealth, she would not find it easy to hide.

They had missed uncovering the identity of the Sith, but the Council did not fault them. They had been close to him. They had uncovered one of the planets that sheltered him. They had taken a small step forward.

He should feel some sense of satisfaction, but he did not. Obi-Wan found himself wondering about things he had not thought about since Qui-Gon's death.

Was the loss of Darra's life worth what they had obtained?

Jude Watson

Was there something he should have done that he did not do?

Had the first vision of Qui-Gon in the tomb come from the Sith, or deep within him?

Had he failed?

Darra's death would once have been an aberration. Why did he feel it was a portent? With every second that passed, he felt more death approach. Time and again he had to shake off the memory of Granta Omega curling up like a child as he let go of life. What could he have been, if he had not been in the grip of his obsession? The Sith found weakness and exploited it. They took a flaw and twisted it into a weapon. Whoever the Sith was, he had goaded Omega, used him, and abandoned him. How could the Jedi fight someone who had no mercy for anyone or anything?

Over the last few days, Anakin had retreated to the Map Room where he liked to meditate. Obi-Wan couldn't put his finger on it, but he felt that somehow Anakin was involved in what had happened to Darra. Not directly, but somehow...

He hated himself for having this feeling. Of course, if that were true his Padawan would have told him.

Obi-Wan found himself outside the Council Room doors. He tried to clear his mind before he entered. Some days it was difficult meeting so many Jedi gifted in Force-sensitivity at once.

The doors slid open. The full Council had assembled. The members all acknowledged Obi-Wan as he took his place in the middle of the room, where he had stood so many times.

"A sad conclusion to the mission, it was," Yoda said. "Grieving are all of us."

"Darra Thel-Tanis has joined the Force," Mace said. "We will celebrate her life."

"Uneasy we are with the conduct of the two Padawans, Ferus Olin and Tru Veld," Yoda said.

Adi Gallia nodded. "We have reconsidered our decision to speed up the trials for chosen Padawans. We fear we put too much pressure on them."

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

“We need additional Jedi, it’s true,” Oppo Rancisis said. “But we see now that we cannot rush readiness.”

“Our mistake, it was,” Yoda said.

“Mistakes we cannot afford during these times,” Mace added, and then said, “We will commend your Padawan for his bravery. To face a Sith is the hardest task for a Jedi. Anakin showed ingenuity and bravery throughout the mission.”

Yoda peered at Obi-Wan. “Something to share with us, you have?”

Obi-Wan hesitated. He had doubts. He had fears. He had sorrows. But this was not the place.

“No, Master Yoda,” he said.

“Disappointed your Padawan will be, to hear that we have cancelled our plans to accelerate Knighthood,” Yoda said.

“Yes, Anakin will be disappointed,” Obi-Wan said. “He is not good at waiting.”

“Then wait, he should,” Yoda said, nodding.

“Thank you, Master Kenobi,” Mace said. “You may send in Ferus Olin.”

Obi-Wan bowed and retreated. When he walked into the outer chamber, Ferus stood.

“They are ready for you,” Obi-Wan told him.

Ferus turned a face to him full of such misery and heartbreak that Obi-Wan was moved.

“You are not here to be punished, least of all by yourself,” Obi-Wan told him.

“I must go on living,” Ferus responded. “That is my punishment.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Anakin waited until he saw Obi-Wan leave the outer chamber. He wasn't ready to talk to his Master yet. He waited until Obi-Wan was gone, then slipped inside.

He didn't want to see Ferus face-to-face, but he had to find out what was going on. What would the Council do? Now, of all times, Anakin felt a strange attachment to his fellow Padawan.

The shock of Darra's death hadn't worn off. He still couldn't grasp it. He still couldn't believe it wasn't possible to see her again, to hear her voice. If the Force was so powerful, why couldn't it stop death? Why couldn't he break through that wall and see his friend again?

He felt a rustle behind him, and saw Tru backing out of the chamber.

"Tru!" Anakin called. Reluctantly, Tru edged in a few steps. "Do you know anything?"

Tru shook his head. He didn't quite meet Anakin's eyes.

"I haven't seen much of you since we've been back," Anakin said.

"I know."

"I'm sorry about the censure."

"I deserved it."

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

The question burned on Anakin's tongue. "Why did you go to Ferus instead of me to fix your lightsaber? I would have done a better job."

"I didn't go to Ferus," Tru said. "He came to me. He had noticed that it was on half-power at the end of the battle in the monastery. But I wouldn't have gone to you because I wouldn't have wanted to get you in trouble. You would have kept my secret. Just like Ferus did. I was wrong not to tell my Master. I was wrong to let Ferus stay silent. I was just about as wrong as I could be."

"You were thinking of the mission," Anakin said.

"We were all wrong," Tru continued, as if he hadn't even registered what Anakin had said.

"We did our best," Anakin said. "And Omega is dead."

"So is Darra."

Tru turned and walked out.

Anakin started after him. Something was wrong. Something had changed between him and his friend, and he didn't know why.

He stopped when the Council doors opened. Ferus walked out. He almost walked by Anakin without seeing him, as though he was blinded by his feelings.

"Ferus?"

Ferus turned. "Anakin. Well. I think you should be the first to know. I have resigned from the Jedi Order."

"What?!" Anakin felt shock ripple through him. "But why?"

"Because I was responsible for Darra's death."

"That's not true! You couldn't have known—"

"But I did. I knew that Tru's lightsaber had malfunctioned. I offered to fix it secretly. I did not tell his Master or urge him to do so. His lightsaber failed in battle, and Darra was killed trying to protect me."

"But you thought you'd fixed it!"

Ferus stopped. He gazed at Anakin for a long moment.

Jude Watson

"You knew?" he asked. "You knew Tru's lightsaber had broken? You must have seen me fixing it."

"I didn't say that."

"No. You didn't. But there are only the two of us here, Anakin. You don't have to lie."

Anakin said nothing. As usual, Ferus was trying to trap him, trying to show Anakin how much nobler he was.

"When we got back, I took it to the Jedi Master Tolan Hing," Ferus said, naming the Jedi who was known for his expertise in the workings of a lightsaber. "He told me that that the fusing between the flux aperture and the power cell needed a slight adjustment. Nothing major—Tru might never have noticed it. Except that in battle, the power drained faster than normal."

"I don't know why you're telling me this..."

Tru's voice came from behind him. "Because you fixed the flux aperture. And you would have known that it needed to be rechecked after the power cell boost."

Anakin turned. "You didn't come to me!"

Tru shook his head. "That's funny. Shouldn't you have said, *But I didn't know it was broken?*"

"You're trying to trap me," Anakin said. "Both of you," he added, with an angry look at Ferus. "Tru, I would never do anything deliberately to put you in a position..."

Tru's face hardened. His silver eyes held a sheen Anakin had never seen before. They were icy, as though Anakin could slip off his gaze.

"I wondered," Tru said. "When we got back here, I wondered if you knew. I saw how you froze in the tomb. 'But not my friend,' I said to myself. 'My friend would not do that.' But then I thought about how you feel about Ferus, how angry you had been. You would want him to get in trouble, even if it meant exposing me."

"That's not fair!"

"And suddenly I realized—yes, *Anakin could have done that.*"

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

"You're looking at this all wrong," Anakin said. But how could he explain? He couldn't admit that he knew that Tru's lightsaber was broken because he couldn't explain why he'd forgotten to tell him to readjust it. He still didn't know how he'd forgotten something so crucial. Tru would think he'd deliberately forgotten it.

There was nothing he could say to convince him otherwise, because he himself didn't know.

"I don't think so," Tru said. "I think I'm truly seeing you for the first time."

Anakin swallowed. He didn't know what to say. This was an unfamiliar Tru, not the friend of his childhood.

"I'll see you outside," Tru said to Ferus, and walked out.

"Do you see what you've done?" Anakin said, turning savagely to Ferus.

"Yes, I see what I've done," Ferus said. "Do you?" He shook his head. "I'm afraid for you. You think admitting you were wrong opens you up to attack."

"That's not true," Anakin countered. "I think you should save your fears for yourself."

A spasm of pain crossed Ferus's face. Anakin could not imagine how awful it must feel, to give up the Jedi Order. It would be like giving up everything he lived for.

"If the Jedi ever need me, I will be there," Ferus said quietly. "That includes you, Anakin."

Ferus walked away quickly. Anakin looked after him angrily. Ferus got the last word. Not only that, but it had been a kind one. The noble Padawan to the last.

Not a Padawan, though. Not any longer.

Satisfaction soon curdled into frustration. Anakin felt as though he'd been beaten, but he didn't know why. He remembered the helplessness he'd felt in the energy trap. He never wanted to feel that way again. Yet he was trapped in his envy, in his anger, just as surely. Even if Ferus left the Temple forever, he would still remember this feeling.

Jude Watson

No. The feeling would fade. He would make it fade. He would push it down, down with his memories of Shmi. Now that Ferus was gone, Anakin could fulfill his promise. He would bring balance to the Force.

Tru was angry at him, but he had never truly understood the burden that Anakin carried. Maybe Tru had never understood him at all. Maybe no one did, except for his Master. Tru would come around.

Anakin walked out. At the far end of the hallway, he saw Ferus join Tru.

He felt as though he was watching them through the wrong end of electrobinoculars. They seemed so small, so far away.

Feeling his presence, Tru looked back over his shoulder at Anakin. And then it hit him like a punch that knocked the air from his lungs. Tru would never come around. He'd lost his friend forever.

Standing still, he watched Ferus and Tru walk away.

He heard footsteps beside him, and Obi-Wan was next to him.

"Anakin, I've been looking for you."

He turned automatically. "Do you need me?"

"No, I...Anakin? Is something wrong?"

"Ferus has resigned from the Jedi Order."

Obi-Wan let out a breath. "I was afraid he would do something...like that. He feels Darra's death so strongly." There was a lost look in Obi-Wan's eyes as he gazed down the empty hallway. "The legacy of this mission is pain."

Anakin wanted to take away the remote look on his Master's face. He didn't want Obi-Wan to care so much about what happened to Ferus. "The legacy of this mission is that a great enemy has been defeated. I saw you strike him down."

"That is not an act that should bring you satisfaction, my young Padawan," Obi-Wan said sternly. "I took a life."

"It was done as a last resort. And it rid the galaxy of a great evil. Therefore it was necessary and right."

STAR WARS: The Final Showdown

“Necessary—yes. But right?” Obi-Wan shook his head. “That is not a word to throw around lightly. We cannot say what is right. We can only do our best.” Obi-Wan’s gaze warmed. “As you do, Padawan. You never give less than your best. I’m proud of the Jedi you have become.”

Anakin was moved. His Master so rarely spoke this way. “Thank you, Master.”

Obi-Wan gave him a long look. “And...I wanted to tell you. The Jedi Council has decided that they won’t speed up the trials for Padawans. Your Knighthood will have to wait a bit longer.”

Anakin absorbed this news. So there was no chance, then. He would have to wait. It didn’t matter what he did, how well he performed.

“When the time is right, you’ll take the trials, and I have no doubt that you will astonish us all. Until then, we will work together. There is so much left to do, and I’m grateful to have you by my side for a little longer.” Obi-Wan paused. “Anakin? Are you all right?”

He *was* all right, Anakin suddenly realized. The weakness in his knees he’d felt when he saw Tru walk away was gone. In a strange way, the mission had strengthened him. He had a stronger conviction now, a harder edge to fight with. Everything had fallen away from him—his childhood, his friends, his wish to impress the Jedi Council.

He would never be helpless again.

He would only grow stronger.

He had fought with a Sith and seen true power. One day he would be able to match it. He would be able to fight it. Not yet. But someday. Soon.

As a boy, he hadn’t wanted things to change. He wanted to keep those he loved close to him forever. Yet everything did change. He was far from his mother. He had lost Darra. Tru. And Qui-Gon. He couldn’t fight against those kinds of losses. So be it. He would have to push them down until they didn’t matter anymore.

Jude Watson

One day, he would face his worst loss, the loss of his Master. By surpassing him, he would lose him. He pictured Obi-Wan turning to him in slow surprise, grasping for the first time the true extent of his power. Seeing that the student had outstripped the teacher.

On that day, Anakin's heart would break for the last time. He would feel the weight of impossible sorrow.

He would not be able to bear that sorrow. Unless he no longer had a heart.

**End of Volume Two
Concluded**

About the Author

JUDE WATSON is the *New York Times* best-selling author of the Jedi Quest and Jedi Apprentice series, as well as the Star Wars Journals *Darth Maul*, *Queen Amidala*, and *Princess Leia: Captive to Evil*. She currently lives in the Pacific Northwest.

About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.